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LONDON
CHATTO & WINDUS
1906

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CHAPTER I

"Uncle Sis, I want some money!"

"My boy, so do I. I always want money."

"Ah, but you can get it, and I can't!"

"Can I? By Jove, I wish you'd show me how!"

And the Honourable Cecil Cannington, younger brother of the late Earl of Alford, and uncle and guardian to the present Earl, smiled at his nephew with that good-natured charm of manner which had made him, for nearly fifty years, the most popular, if the most impecunious, of mortals.

"Perhaps I will, if you'll promise to be good-natured."

"I can promise that, Jack. It's about the only thing I've succeeded in being all my life."

And Mr. Cannington, who was at breakfast in his chambers in the Albany when his nephew, the young Earl, burst in upon him, threw back his handsome head with the iron-grey hair still curling in rings upon his temples, and laughed with that easy enjoyment with which he backed a bill for a friend, or got a friend to back one for him, or did any one of the hundred and one unwise things which had made his life, of an idle younger brother of noble family and narrow means, such a singular series of ups and downs.

Lord Alford, though he was only eighteen and still at

Eton, looked at his uncle with the patronizing air of a man of the world. With the family good looks, the lad had inherited some of the smartness of that wealthy American mother whose dollars had done so much to restore the prestige of a house whose devotion to sport had well-nigh brought about its downfall.

Though he was not wise enough to curb his own expensive tastes, the schoolboy Earl was shrewd enough to understand the folly of his uncle's, and he criticized his relative with the freedom of the head of his house.

"I don't wonder you want money, uncle! What do you want with chambers—you, a married man with a wife and daughter?" said he, with all the irresponsible impudence of eighteen, as he placed himself astride one of the chairs, and helped himself to a piece of toast.

Mr. Cannington laughed lightly.

"Persis and her mother do so much visiting, Jack, that poor papa has to look after himself a little. But, for the matter of that, what do you want with money, a bit of a boy at school, who ought to be satisfied with five shillings a week to spend on lollipops?"

John, Earl of Alford, drew himself up and grew rather

red.

"I'm a chip of the old block, I suppose," he returned coolly. "Anyhow, I've made a book on the Derby."

"You—a minor! You can't!"

"Can't I? There's a way of doing these things. Of course, I don't make my bets in person, but by some one I can rely upon."

"You're going to be a nice handful for us, young

man!"

The lad shrugged his shoulders.

"How on earth could you expect me to keep off the turf, uncle, when it's in my blood, just as it's in yours, and as it was in my father's?"

"Well, but the turf's one thing, and betting's another,"



said Mr. Cannington, with an assumption of sternness which sat ill on his genial personality.

The young Earl laughed.

"It's supposed to be, of course; but we know it isn't," retorted he. "Now betting, or the turf—call it what you like—requires ready money, and I want you to get some for me."

"Not me! Ask your other guardian, Sir Robert Rothbury."

"Oh no! I shan't. Because it would be of no use to ask him! No; I come to ask my dear, kind, amiable, good-hearted nunky, that wouldn't refuse to do any one a good turn, much less his nephew and the head of his house," replied the lad, with an adroit mixture of humorous flattery and boyish dignity that made Mr. Cannington chuckle even while he was trying his hardest to look grave.

"What is it you want, you young rascal?" said he at last, frowning over his devilled kidneys.

"Well, you know my mother's jewels-"

"Good Heavens, you young scamp!"

"Keep your hair on, uncle. The jewels are mine, aren't they?"

"They will be yours, worse luck, when you're twenty-one. But they aren't now."

"Anyhow, they're not any one else's," replied the youth calmly. "And three years isn't very long to wait."

"Wait three years, then," said Mr. Cannington hastily, with an inkling of what was coming.

"Can't! I must have money now—lots of money. Look here! It's simple enough. The jewels lie at the bankers', the 'City and Shires.' They can't be delivered up to me till I'm of age; but they can be delivered to either of the trustees."

"Not to make ducks and drakes of," retorted Mr. Cannington.

"Certainly not. But to make a pile with."

"Stuff! How should you, a bit of a boy, be able to spot winners, when it's more than I can do, with all my experience?" said Mr. Cannington, interested in spite of himself in the lad's folly, which was his own folly, as it had been that of his father and grandfather before him.

"I can have a shot at it, anyhow," replied young Lord Alford, coolly, "and you're going to help me. You're going to get the jewels, hand them over to me——"

"What, all of them? Three hundred thousand pounds'

worth!"

"Every stone of them! What's the good of doing things by halves? Look here, Uncle Sis. I've not come here without being prepared for what you'd say, and without having my answer. I tell you I'm not the fool you take me for. I've got a system——"

"So has every fool," interpolated his uncle dismally.

"I've worked it out thoroughly, and now I want to put it in practice. And, first, I want you to look into it yourself, and tell me, as a man of experience in turf matters, what you think of it."

The bait took. Scoffing always, and protesting that this was arrant folly, the Honourable Cecil Cannington, having finished his breakfast, allowed himself to look at the elaborate plans his nephew had prepared for making his fortune on the turf in the course of a single season.

In spite of himself, in spite of his better judgment, the elder man, scornful, at first, grew interested, entered into all the young scamp's calculations with the eagerness of the born gambler, and when again the insidious proposal was made to him, that he should withdraw the late Lady Cannington's jewels from the safe custody of the bank and hand them over to his nephew for the purpose of raising a loan upon them, he hesitated still, indeed, but it was with the hesitation of the lost.

"There's no certainty in turt affairs, my boy; and what



5

would happen if you were to lose the money, all the money?"

he asked, with a cautious shake of the head.

"Why, you and old Bob would have to get them back with funds out of the estate," replied the young Earl readily. "There's plenty of money lying there, eating its head off. Only it's so precious tightly tied up that I can't borrow upon it."

His uncle looked at him shrewdly.

"Can't borrow any more than you have borrowed already, I suppose you mean," he said dryly.

The lad laughed.

- "Well, you don't suppose I could have got along on the five hundred a year, which is all you and old Bob Rothbury will officially allow me," said he. "I couldn't even have made a present to Persis on her birthday out of that."
- "Come, don't put the blame of your extravagance on to Persis."
- "I don't. But I'm going to marry her as soon as I leave Oxford, and I should like to have my fling on the turf before I settle down."
- "Don't let Sir Robert know that you want to marry Persis, and don't let him think I want you to," said Mr. Cannington, nervously. "He doesn't approve of marriage between cousins, for one thing, and he doesn't approve of me or of Persis, for another."

The young Earl nodded, and waved his hand.

"What he approves or disapproves doesn't much matter," said he, with a grand air. "At least, it won't matter when once I'm my own master. In the meantime, however, it's best, as you say, to keep our own counsel, and that's what I intend to do, as long as you are nice."

"As long as I let you have your own way in everything, that means," growled his uncle. "Now, for Heaven's sake, if I do let you have the jewels, or part of them, don't be rash. Don't borrow more than we could easily repay, if

things went wrong. And—and—are you sure you can find any one to negotiate the loan for you?"

"Trust me for that. There's a firm of solicitors in Bath, close by our place, Heynes Hall, who will manage it for me."

"Who are they? Respectable, eh?"

"Oh yes, an old firm. Smith and Bridger."

"H'm! Rum thing for a firm like Smith and Bridger to be ready to help you, a minor, in such a business, isn't it?"

"Well, old Smith's dead, and his son, who's come from London, and is new to the business, would like to get in with Lord Alford."

His uncle shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't like it, Jack; I don't like it," said he gloomily. But the artful lad knew by his tone that he would yield in the end to the gentle arts of bribery and flattery combined, which the Eton boy knew how to employ in the achievement of his purpose.

Three days later, just before the end of the Easter vacation, Lord Alford drove up, in a hired carriage, to the door of the old-fashioned house where Smith and Bridger had their offices.

These offices were on the ground-floor, and though it was six o'clock, neither of the partners had yet gone home. They were sitting together in the private office of Mr. Smith, a little, slim, young-looking man of a slightly Jewish type of countenance. He was about forty years of age, although his little turned-up dark moustache would have been taken for that of a lad in the early twenties. Coming into the business on the death of his father, the senior partner, he had been shocked to find that the firm was in grave difficulties which, although as yet not generally known, threatened ruin at no distant date.

His partner, Joel Bridger, was a man of entirely different type. Of the middle height, or a little more, portly and



benign of aspect, he looked, with his grey hair, long grey beard and mild blue eyes, which shone through gold-rimmed spectacles, the very picture of philanthropic content and peace; his good-humoured manner, and a certain mellowness of voice aided this impression.

Both partners were men of strict views, but while Mr. Smith attended the English church, and read the lessons on Sundays, his partner was a Nonconformist, and a local preacher of great activity, and even some small renown.

"I ought to have known," said Mr. Smith hoarsely, as they pored together over a letter they had just received. "What was the use of getting me to leave my own business in London, small as it was, for this? Now, when we go, it will be a complete smash-up, for me as well as you. And I have a daughter to bring up, remember, while your children are grown up and out in the world."

Mr. Bridger looked really distressed. His voice was as gentle as possible as he laid his hand on the shoulder of the

younger man.

"My dear Alaric," said he, almost affectionately, "consider. Your dear father was always the head, the boss; everything was in his hands; he always took the lead. When we got into difficulties, it was to him I looked to pull us through. And when—when he died "—he hurried his words a little after this, for, indeed, there had been ugly rumours about the manner of old Smith's death, and suggestions that he had died by his own hand—"I didn't know where to turn. It seemed to me that a younger head, and that of Smith's son, might do more than mine. I did it for the best, indeed."

Without feeling quite as cordial towards the old man as the voice invited him to be, Alaric Smith, with an impatient movement, looked again at the letter.

It was from a bank to which they were indebted in the amount of eight thousand pounds, and it was a peremptory and final notice that unless the amount was paid in within seven days, proceedings would at once be taken to make the firm bankrupt.

The bank had lent money on the security of leases which had proved to be forgeries, and though the firm declared themselves innocent of the fraud, the discovery had lead to the threat in question.

As to the forgeries, young Smith did not ask many questions. On hearing of them, old Mr. Bridger had been overwhelmed with amazement and horror; and whatever his doubts may have been, the younger man kept them to himself.

Anyhow, here was ruin hanging over them, and neither had a suggestion or a word of hope for the other.

It was while they sat thus that the hired carriage drove up, and that young Lord Alford, the picture of rosy health, and very smart and trim in his light travelling clothes, sprang out and dashed up the steps in a great hurry.

In one hand he carried a large brown bag, with a light overcoat thrown over it.

"Who's that?" said Mr. Smith, who was within sight of the window, behind the wire blind.

"Why, it's young Alford," said Mr. Bridger in wonderment. "What's he doing down here?"

Mr. Smith stood up.

"He wrote to me," said he, "taking me for my father, I suppose, three days ago. He said he wanted to see me, to get me to negotiate a loan for him. A boy at Eton!" he added with a shrug of the shoulders.

Mr. Bridger shook his head, sighed, and rolled up his eyes.

They're all alike, those Canningtons, unfortunately," said he. "Betting, racing—they——"

There was a sharp rap at the door, and then, not waiting to be ushered in by the clerk, there burst in the lad himself, fresh-coloured, smiling, the picture of health and good spirits.

"May I come in-? Hope I'm not intruding!" For



both the partners exhibited unmistakable signs of discomfiture. "Didn't you get my letter? Which is Mr. Smith?"

The younger partner recovered himself and came forward.

"Yes, Lord Alford, I did, but I didn't expect to see you so soon. Pray sit down."

Mr. Bridger, who was not able to subdue all signs of emotion so quickly, made an excuse to leave them together, and the Earl, bursting with his errand, dashed into his subject at once.

"Mr. Smith, I want thirty thousand pounds," said he, and I want it at once."

The solicitor smiled in spite of himself. For this rosycheeked lad to name such a sum, when he had expected twenty or thirty, or at most fifty pounds, to be the utmost extent of his needs, amused him, anxious and excited as he was.

He checked himself immediately, and said indulgently—
"Thirty thousand pounds is a large sum to raise on the

spur of the moment, your lordship."

"Ah, but I can give security. Look here." And unlocking the bag, into which he had already inserted the key, the young fellow drew out and opened, before the dazzled eyes of the solicitor, the cases of such a collection of precious stones, mounted in various forms, bracelets, brooches, necklaces, pendants, as fairly took his breath away. "And look here. Here's our centre-piece," the lad cried, as jubilantly as a child, as, flinging open the pale-blue velvet case in which it was concealed, he revealed to the scandalized gaze of the lawyer an enormous diamond, so large, so brilliant in the rays of the setting sun that came through the window, that Mr. Smith uttered an exclamation in spite of himself.

The Earl chuckled with all the delight of a mischievous schoolboy.

"Ah, ha! I thought we should astonish you!" he cried lightly, as he held up the jewel and made it flash in

the sun. "Do you know what that's worth? Nominally worth, I suppose I ought to say, for these are fancy articles, that vary in value with the folly of the would-be purchaser. Well, that's worth two hundred thousand pounds, and a king wanted it, but couldn't afford it. My grandfather, my Yankee grandfather, bought it for my mother as a wedding-present. There's not its equal in England, if you leave out the Koh-i-noor!"

"You're not thinking of raising money on that, surely!" said Mr. Smith, now thoroughly alarmed. "You couldn't, you know. These big stones are known. This is an heirloom, isn't it?"

"I don't think so. There was some intention of protecting it in some way, to ensure its passing with the title. But I believe the truth is my parents both found it convenient to borrow money on it themselves at different times, so it comes in handy for me!"

"You certainly haven't the right to deal with it yet though," said Mr. Smith, quietly.

The lad gave him a sly look.

"P'raps not," said he, "if anybody knew. But they don't. Anyhow, look here. If you can't get me thirty thousand on the security of the big 'un, you can raise enough for my most pressing needs on some of the other things. These necklaces and the rest are worth another hundred thousand."

"It's a difficult matter, though, to raise a large sum on

things of this sort," said the lawyer, cautiously.

"Come, don't make difficulties. It'll be five hundred pounds for you now if you carry it through, and plenty more work for you by and by. Listen. Get me thirty thousand on the big stone if you can. Or if they ask too many awkward questions shout him, get me as much as you can on the other things; twenty at the least I must have, and I should think there could be no difficulty about that, considering the beauty of the things."



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"I—I don't know. I think I'd rather you tried some other channel, Lord Alford," said Mr. Smith, who was growing red and strangely agitated.

But the boy was too impatient for that.

"No," said he, obstinately. "I've no time to find any other channel. This is my last day, and you know you said in your letter you'd help me if you could. Come now, you did, didn't you?"

"But I should like to have some authority for this-"

At once the schoolboy became the nobleman. With the slightest change of posture he assumed a certain dignity, as he said with great coolness—

"You have the authority of the Earl of Alford. What

more do you want?"

"I should like that of your trustees and guardians."

"Will this do?"

The lad drew from his pocket a letter addressed to himself, and taking it from its torn envelope, handed it to the lawyer.

"My DEAR JACK," it ran,

"I suppose you can have the jewels, but ever since I gave them to you this morning I have been worried about it. Don't raise more money than you want; and let me have the rest of the things back when you have decided what to borrow upon. Tell Bridger and Smith to be careful who they deal with.

"Yours,

"That's the note I got from my uncle last night," said Lord Alford. "I should think you ought to be satisfied now."

Still Mr. Smith looked agitated. But he was not allowed to make further protests. With a hurried adjuration to get the loan effected as quickly as possible, and to communicate



with him at once when he should have succeeded, the young man thrust the portmanteau with its precious contents into the lawyer's hand, shook hands with the same boyish cheerfulness which had characterized his behaviour throughout the interview, and, dashing out of the office and into the waiting carriage, drove away, leaving the solicitor in a state of mind which revealed itself in the contortions of the muscles of his face.

When he had been alone for a few seconds the door opened softly, and old Mr. Bridger stole into the room. Catching sight of the flashing gems which lay on his partner's desk he stopped short, and a look of alarm spread over his face.

"Stop him! Call him back!" cried he, in a hoarse whisper. "Those are the Cannington jewels. They——"

The younger man's hand closed upon his arm like a vice.

"Hush!" said he. "This is my business, not yours. I've got to get a loan for—the—the——" He was going to say "boy," but changed his mind and said "the Earl."

"You know he's a minor?"

"I know everything. Leave it to me."

The partners dared not meet each other's eyes. Mr. Bridger fidgeted about the room, looking furtively at Mr. Smith, and the latter put the bag in the safe, locked it, and made no further reference to the momentous incident.

On the following morning the younger partner went up to London by the mail train, leaving a note for Mr. Bridger, telling him that he might be away for two or three days.

It was on the evening of the third day that he came back. Haggard, pale, excited, irritable, he came hurriedly into the office just as Mr. Bridger was leaving for the night.

"Well?" said the older man, querulously. "What's

the news?"



13

Mr. Smith did not meet his eyes, but hung his head and answered in a hoarse whisper—

"Bad news, very bad." He spoke with a dry mouth,

and in jerks.

"Good Heavens! What do you mean? What have you done?"

Alaric Smith, shifting his eyes, trembling, unable to keep still, answered almost inaudibly—

"I've-lost-Lord Alford's-jewels!"

"Lost them? Lost them?" gasped Mr. Bridger, incredulously.

Mr. Smith looked at him menacingly from under knitted brows.

"Yes, lost them, lost them all; had them stolen!" snarled he. Then, as the older man fell back a step, in helpless, mute consternation, the other made a sort of spring at him, and whispered—"But, the bank's paid."

CHAPTER II

It was late on a foggy evening, two days after the return from town to Bath of Alaric Smith, when the Honourable Cecil Cannington, dining comfortably at his club, was surprised and alarmed by the sudden apparition of his nephew, young Lord Alford, in his long travelling coat, wearing on his handsome, boyish face, such a look of dejection and misery as no one had ever before seen on his features.

"By Jove, Jack, what's the matter? You look—stay—you don't mean to tell me—that anything's gone wrong with—with——"

The lad, who had thrown himself into a chair beside his uncle, nodded emphatically.

"That's just it," he said hoarsely. "Something has gone wrong. Everything's gone wrong, deuced wrong. Listen, uncle, and keep quiet if you can. That confounded fool, Smith, of Smith and Bridger, has—lost the jewels, lost the lot!"

Not even the lad's look and word of warning sufficed to prevent his unlucky guardian from giving vent to his feelings in a sort of moan.

Then, staring out before him, with eyes which saw nothing, he stammered out, in a husky whisper—

"Lost the lot! Lost them! Do you mean by betting? Or---"

"No, no. He's had them stolen, bag and all. Brought them up to town to get a loan on them, and was robbed the moment he got up. His story is that he put the bag down



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for one moment in the waiting-room at Paddington, and that, while he was looking in his own portmanteau for an address, some one, who must have been on the watch, ran off with the bag in a twinkling."

From a condition approaching apoplexy Mr. Cannington had recovered and plunged into a state of violent excitement.

"I don't believe it!" he cried in a sonorous voice. "I don't believe a word of the story. If——"

The lad jumped up and laid his hand with a strong grip on his uncle's shoulder.

"Come to your chambers with me, uncle, where we can talk," said he.

He had had time, young as he was, to get used to the thought of the loss he had sustained, and he was therefore better able than the older man to consider the position. Uppermost in the minds of both, as they drove back to the Albany in a hansom together, was the thought: What would Sir Robert say?

"He'll make me responsible, Jack. Great Scot! It's ruin!" croaked Mr. Cannington, when, once safely shut into his own sitting-room, he could throw himself into his arm-chair, bury his head in his hands, and give himself up to the horror of the situation.

"No, he won't, he shan't. Here, buck up, uncle, it's or no use to look glum about it. After all, it's my own fault, and it's I who have got to bear the loss."

"I tell you Rothbury will put all the blame on me," said Mr. Cannington, who, pale as death, was now pouring out brandy with a shaking hand. "Jack, I can't face it. I shall cut my throat! Fancy the disgrace—the scandal—it must all come out, and I—I can't face it."

The young Earl, who was as kind-hearted as he was wilful, grew louder in his consolations.

"Uncle, the fault's mine, and the blame's mine. Do you think I'm not man enough to take it upon my own shoulders? It was I who insisted upon having the jewels,

and it's I who stand the racket. And look here, I feel I owe you some reparation for the mess I've got you into. For it is a devil of a mess, of course. So I'll marry Persis straight away, and then we'll stand back to back and weather the storm together."

"Will you, Jack? But Rothbury won't let you!"

"He won't be able to help himself."

The Honourable Cecil Cannington sat up. He looked

more cheerful, but he shook his head doubtfully.

"I think I'd rather you waited a little. I should like to see my girl married to you, of course. As for all that about cousins, it's arrant nonsense, and there's nothing in it. But I don't want it to look as if I'd rushed a bit of a lad like you into marriage, just because I want to see her well established. No, Jack, I can take your word for it that you'll marry her when you're twenty-one. That's the earliest age at which you decently can marry."

"Trust me, then. I give you my word," said the young Earl. "And now, remember, whatever old Bob says, you're

to take it quietly."

"What will he do?" asked Mr. Cannington, in a low voice, after a pause. "There'll be a prosecution, of course."

"I—I suppose there will, if they can find the thief."

"Do you suspect Smith?" The lad frowned painfully.

"I don't want to. Of course old Bob will. But the poor fellow came to me in such a state, throwing himself upon my mercy for the sake of his child—No, I'm sure the worst we can say of him is that he must be a born fool."

"If Rothbury doesn't go for him, he'll go for me!" said Mr. Cannington dismally. "You know he'll go for

somebody. 1"

And they dropped into a melancholy silence.

When the awkward facts had to be confessed to Sir Robert, however, he received the news in a manner which surprised both his co-trustee and his headstrong ward.



Sir Robert Rothbury was a hard-headed, sturdy-framed North countryman, as shrewd as Cecil Cannington was silly. He heard all, interviewed everybody, including the police, and then—did nothing.

At least, that was what the culprits thought.

Weeks passed into months; the firm of Bridger and Smith, though overwhelmed with distress at the loss, held up its head, paid its debts, and prospered. Mr. Smith even bought a nice house, in its own grounds, a few miles from Bath, and furnished it with unostentatious comfort and luxury. His little daughter remained at her school in Kensington, and, the young Earl having steadfastly refused to take the advice offered him and to make Smith bankrupt, there seemed to be every likelihood that the robbery would pass into the category of undiscovered crimes, when an officer from Scotland Yard made his appearance one morning at Mr Smith's charming country house, and arrested him on a charge of stealing the Cannington jewels.

Mr. Smith appeared thunder-struck; he asked at whose instance the warrant had been issued, and was told that it was at that of the trustees for the Earl of Alford.

"The charge is absurd," said he, as, with pale face but calm demeanour, he stood face to face with the officer. "The Earl knows everything. So convinced was he that I told him nothing but the truth concerning the loss of the jewels, that herefused any offer at attempted restitution on my part."

The detective smiled slightly. The restitution of three hundred thousand pounds' worth of property by the solicitor

seemed scarcely within the bounds of possibility.

Mr. Smith was shrewd enough not to say much more; it was almost in silence that, when his brougham had been brought round, he sat by the detective's side on the drive to the Bath police-court, where rumours of the sensational event of his arrest had already brought together an excited crowd of the curious.

17

There was a manifest reluctance on the part of the local justices to prolong the painful ordeal of hearing the charge against a man who had often been their host and their guest; and when, sureties for the bail of three thousand pounds not being forthcoming, he was remanded in custody, there was a feeling of painful tension among all those present in the court.

In the course of the next few days Alaric Smith learnt that, the police having been quietly active in the case ever since the loss of the jewels, had discovered several things; one was that a quantity of the lost jewellery had been sold to different London jewellers on the day following Smith's arrival in London, by a man in a fur coat, who had a grey moustache: another was that a well-known London wig-maker had sold such a moustache, on the previous evening, to a man answering to the description of Alaric Smith.

It being found further that Mr. Smith had purchased a second-hand, fur-lined overcoat on the same evening, although the garment had since disappeared, this fact formed a third and important link in the chain, and the bank where he had paid in a large sum in respect of an over-draft, having testified that the whole sum was paid in gold, while it was further proved that in each instance gold only had been asked for and given for the jewels, the case became very strong.

His partner, old Joel Bridger, was in despair. Not only did he protest, in the strongest manner, that Smith could not be guilty of this colossal crime, but he visited him in prison while he was under remand, not only to condole with him, but to offer him what help he could.

"You'll plead 'Not guilty,' of course" said he with inquiring eyes fixed penetratingly upon his peccant partner.

"Of course."

A pause.

19

"You don't think there's any fear—of—of——" Smith raised his head and answered impatiently—

"Why not face the truth? The case looks strong, innocent as I am. Listen, Bridger. If they convict me—unjustly, mind, but if they do, swear to look after Nellie, and—and not to let her know."

"I swear," said Bridger, his venerable beard sweeping his breast as he bowed his head to listen.

And—don't sell my house: do you hear? Don't sell it or let it. Leave it alone; leave it just as it is—till I come out."

Bridger looked at him searchingly.

"My poor fellow," said he, "if you were to be convicted — which Heaven forbid — you'd never live your sentence out—never!"

Indeed Smith, who had never been very strong, was already a wreck, thin, hectic, shaken, since the day of his arrest. He made an impatient gesture.

"Never mind," said he. "Swear that, too."

"I swear."

Each held the other's hand, each looked into the other's eye. Then over the face of the elder man, as he, after a sign of dismissal from the other, turned to go, there came a strange, almost a furtive look.

He came back a step.

"It might help you a great deal," he said in a soft, mellow undertone, "if you were to tell some one you could trust—me for instance—where you suppose the big diamond, the Countess's diamond, to be. You know it does not appear to have been offered for sale at all. Where do you think it is now?" he ended coaxingly.

Smith looked him steadily in the face. "I haven't the least idea," said he curtly.

Quite hurt at this brevity towards such an old friend, old Mr. Bridger went out, muttering.

He knew that the answer was a lie.

Two months later, after an exciting trial which became a cause célèbre, Alaric Smith, for fraudulently converting to his own use property valued at three hundred thousand pounds, received for and on account of the Earl of Alford, was sentenced to fourteen years' penal servitude.



CHAPTER III

It was seven years after the conviction and sentence of Alaric Smith, that a magnificent steam-yacht glided one May evening into the calm waters of Rock Bay, glad to find safe anchorage, for the mist was rising over the sea and fog-horns were sounding from time to time along the irregular and dangerous western coast.

There was a little straggling town which took its name from the bay, lying at the foot of the cliffs; and the faint lights of the houses and street-lamps could be seen dimly through the mist from the deck of the yacht, where a merry, not to say noisy, party of well-groomed men and smartly dressed ladies hung over the sides, criticized the choice of an anchorage, and woke the echoes of the solemn and silent rocks to east and west of them.

"Who's for the shore?" cried a rather tall, good-looking young man of five-and-twenty or so, the peak of whose well-worn yachting cap shaded a pair of merry blue eyes and a face full of careless good-nature.

The steam-pinnace had been lowered, and two or three of the yacht's crew, including an engineer, had already taken their places in it, and were looking up for their master's orders.

There was a moment of indecision among the ladies. Then one of them, a very tall, broad-shouldered, queenly young woman in a dress of scarlet serge, and a long darkblue coat and dark-blue cap, shrugged her shoulders and shook her head.

"Not me, for one," said she. "It's too foggy, Jack. It would be all right going, but how about coming back?"

"Besides, the fog always takes one's hair out of curl, and to make a bedraggled first appearance is a mistake," added a tiny little woman with merry, twinkling eyes, the features of a white negress, and an indescribable air of being pretty in spite of nature. She was dressed all in white serge trimmed with scarlet braid, and her little hands were loaded with magnificent rings. Under each arm she held a tiny toy-dog, and she spoke with the accent of an educated woman, which is more than could be said of her companions of her own sex.

"Oh, the place doesn't contain more than half a dozen inhabitants, and they are all savages," cried Barrett Browne, a young fellow who betrayed, even in the way he wore his yachting clothes, in the angle of his cap, in the poise of his head, and the manner of his walk, more intimacy with the things of the turf than with those of the sea. "Come, Miss Dawes, won't you venture?"

Miss Dawes was the big, handsome girl in scarlet.

"I think not. What do you say, mamma?"

And she turned to a stout, middle-aged woman, whose face was unnaturally whitened, but who still showed traces of considerable past beauty, and who, wise in her generation, was the only one of the party not to affect conventional yachting dress.

"I should say, put it off till the morning, and have your dinner in comfort," said Mrs. Dawes.

And her views being echoed by the two remaining ladies, both of whom were more remarkable for good looks than refinement, the two young men were the only members of the party to go ashore.

The little pinnace was creeping carefully along in the inky-black water beside the old pier, the rough beams of which, slimy with a fringe of green seaweed and encrusted



23

with limpets, leaned down towards the water at all angles, picturesque in their ancient irregularity.

At the sea end of the antiquated structure there was a broad slipway shelving to the sea, and crouching upon this, alone in the dusk and the fog, the yacht's owner, from his look-out post in the bow of the pinnace, saw something which he took to be a female figure.

The boat had glided past this point and was feeling her way slowly to the landing-stage, where a couple of the old salts, without whom no ancient pier is complete, were shouting directions in the fog.

His attention attracted, however, by something in that crouching figure the boat had passed, the owner of the yacht left his place in the bow of the tiny craft, and going to the stern, strained his eyes towards the slipway.

Suddenly he saw, dimly indeed, the figure stand erect for a moment, and then disappear in the gloom. He turned quickly to his companion.

"Did you hear a splash?" asked he in a low voice.

"No," said Barrett Browne, wondering. "Splash! Why?"

"Hard astern!" shouted the yacht-owner to the engineer.

The little craft glided backwards through the dark water, while the young man stared intently down into the eddies which were swirling round the head of the pier.

As the boat shot out beyond the last of the black beams, he, still staring into the water, uttered a little cry.

"There she is! I knew it!" he cried.

And at the same moment, throwing off his reefer coat, he shot over the side into the water.

By this time, Barrett Browne had seen what it was that had excited his companion. Something dark rose to the surface of the water a little way out, on the other side of the pier, and then disappeared, leaving a faint ripple behind.

There was a moment of intense excitement, as the

young man, a powerful swimmer, dived and disappeared. Then he rose again to the surface, grasping in his hand what proved to be a woman's dark dress, and towing the wearer to meet the pinnace.

"By Jove, it is a woman!" cried Barrett, as he and the sailors, not without difficulty, got both rescuer and rescued on board. "But she's dead!"

"I hope not! Back to the yacht, quick!" shouted the rescuer, who was shivering after his plunge.

The woman, meanwhile, lay stark and still, with grey

face and closed eyes, and without a sign of life.

"Better take her ashore, hadn't you?" suggested Barrett, to whom the prospect of hauling up a drowned woman on to the deck of the *Gaiety Girl* appeared particularly repulsive. "It's uncanny to take a dead woman on board. Besides, you'll frighten the ladies."

"Ladies be hanged!" retorted the young man emphatically. "We shall have a better chance of bringing her to on the yacht than we should on shore, where it would be half an hour before we could get so much as a shilling's-worth of brandy."

"But if she's dead-"

"She's not dead, my lord," said one of the sailors, who had been examining the half-drowned woman. "You can feel her heart goin'."

"Poor thing!"

And Lord Alford went down on his knees beside the unconscious woman, rubbing her hands in a weak but well-meaning attempt to restore the circulation, while Barrett Browne got as far away as he could from what he considered a gruesome spectacle.

"She's but a bit of a girl, my lord. She must have

slipped on the seaweed," suggested the sailor.

The young Earl had a different theory. He remembered the crouching attitude, and besides, people who slip into deep water by accident generally do their best to make



25

the fact known. But the girl had uttered no sound, and had slipped off the pier without so much as an audible splash.

He was interested in this unhappy girl, whose long fair hair was still, as he discovered on closer inspection, worn down her back, tied by a bow of black ribbon at the nape of the neck. Her features were small, her figure slight, her hands remarkably well-formed and delicate. Her dress was of the plainest kind—a dark frock of ankle length, with a black cloth jacket. The hat had disappeared, and she wore no gloves.

Who was she? What was the grief keen enough to urge her to attempt her own life?

Lord Alford was still wondering when the pinnace came alongside the yacht, and amid a chorus of little shrieks of horror from the ladies, the unconscious girl was lifted on board and carried down into one of the cabins.

Luckily, there was intelligent help to be had at once. Mrs. Franks, the stewardess, as she was called, was a woman of experience and resource; she had nursed many an invalid in her time, and was now, at the age of fifty, a splendid specimen of a capable, motherly woman, tall, strong, gentle, self-controlled. Half an hour of her ministrations were enough to restore the half-drowned girl not only to consciousness, but to remembrance.

She sat up in the wicker-chair in which Mrs. Franks had placed her, drew a long, shivering sigh, looked round her, and began the usual question—

"Where-"

Before Mrs. Franks could answer it, there was a tap at the cabin door, and the owner of the yacht peeped in with a smile on his good-natured face.

"How's our invalid, eh, Mrs. Franks? None the worse for her dip, I hope?"

The girl, who had started to her feet, upon which she was not very steady, looked at him, while a slight flush came into her white cheeks.

Mrs. Franks smiled.

"This is-" she began.

The young man came in, smiling still more.

"Hush!" he said. "Don't introduce us too hastily. Let us take our time over things. Sit down," and he insisted upon her dropping back into the chair from which she had risen, "and tell me how this accident happened."

He nodded at Mrs. Franks, who withdrew quietly, though the girl threw an imploring look at her. She was in the mood to prefer the woman's presence to that of the unknown man, kind as his manner was. She became suddenly conscious, too, that her appearance was the reverse of conventionally correct. Her wet things having been taken off, she had been clothed in fortuitous garments, of which the salient features were a long print skirt of Mrs. Franks', and a man's reefer coat, the sleeves of which hid her hands.

But there was more to trouble her than her costume. With each moment her remembrance of the events which had preceded her rash plunge grew keener, and there now came into her eyes such a look of misery and dismay that Lord Alford's kind heart was touched to the quick, and his tone was gentleness itself as he spoke to her.

"Don't look so frightened; don't look so miserable," said he. "We're all ready to do whatever we can for you, and as for me, since I pulled you out of the water, I'm bound to do my very best that you shan't slip into it again, aren't I?"

"You pulled me out? Oh,"—the word was a sob—"why did you?"

And breaking down, the girl buried her face in her hands and burst into tears.

"Come, come," said the young man kindly, patting her shoulder with a touch which was peremptory as well as sympathetic, "this will never do! You're a silly girl—an awfully silly girl, to behave like this, in a world that's full



27

of people ready to do what they can to help you and be kind to you."

But at that the girl's aspect changed. Suddenly she sat up again, and looking at him through her tears with fiery eyes, cried fiercely—

"Oh, are they? The world's full of nothing but kind,

good people, you think. Oh, if you knew!"

And she turned away her head, and, twisting the handkerchief which had been lent her violently round and round her fingers, she sat staring out before her with a face full of unmistakable woe.

"Well, let us hear all about it, then. Who has been unkind to you? Won't you tell me? Or—or would you rather tell Mrs. Franks?"

"Mrs. Franks? Who is that?"

"She was with you just now. Would you rather tell her about your falling into the water?"

She turned to him quickly. She still seemed rather dazed and out of herself, not unnaturally.

"No. I'll tell you. If I must tell somebody, I'd rather tell you. But you can't help me, nobody can. I've been driven nearly mad by the things the other girls said to me at the school where I've been. They found out something, not about me, but about one of my relations, and they treated me—oh, dreadfully! And the mistress, too. Miss Baldock was just as bad as the girls. It was she who told them, I think. And ever since I've never had a moment's peace. They look at me, and they won't talk to me, but they talk at me, and—at least—I couldn't—couldn't bear it!"

And the shiver that passed over the girl's frame, the look of agony that appeared in her big hazel eyes, were eloquent testimony to what she had been made to suffer. Lord Alford's heart was touched, and his indignation roused at the same time.

"Who is this woman who has treated you like this?" he asked. "Where does she live?"

"At Bay View School, half-way up the road that leads to the top of the cliffs. But it's of no use speaking to her. I'd rather die—I would die rather than go back there again. She couldn't make the girls nice to me, you know. It's too late, now she's told them all about it."

Lord Alford felt a delicacy about asking her what "it"

precisely was. He got up.

"Look here," he said earnestly, "whatever Miss Baldock and the other girls may have done, you ought to be ashamed of yourself for acting as you did; and I'm quite shocked to see a nice little girl like you behaving so."

The girl sobbed at these words, but through her tears

she smiled.

"Ah, you don't understand," she said.

"Why didn't you write to your friends, and tell them to take you away?"

"Because I haven't got any."

"Oh, come, I can't quite believe that. Are you an orphan?"

She hid her face, bending so that he should not see the flush that at once overspread her pale cheeks at the question.

"My mother's dead, and my father's—abroad," she said.

"Have you no guardian, then?"

She hesitated.

"He's angry with me," she said at last, "because—because I don't like his son."

"Oh—oh! Perhaps there's a love affair in the case, then?"

She looked up again with spirit.

"Indeed, there isn't! Not on my side, at any rate, and not on his, I think."

"But why should this young man be so anxious to marry you, if he isn't in love with you?"

She looked rather puzzled.

"It's his father who is anxious, not he," she said. "And why I'm sure I don't know."



29

"This is interesting," said Lord Alford. "I must inquire into the matter, and——"

The girl was on her feet, earnestly pleading, in a

moment.

"Oh no, don't; please don't," she said, in an eager whisper. "You've done every thing that you can, indeed! I promise I'll not—not meet with any more accidents. Do please let me be rowed ashore, and——"

"But where will you go?"

She caught her breath. For a moment both were silent,

then he said, gently-

"Look here. I won't detain you against your will; I won't do anything you don't want me to do. But I should feel more comfortable if you would wait here on board the yacht till—till "—he hesitated, and with a sudden happy thought, wound up—" till your own clothes are dried. You'd feel rather awkward if you were to be landed in those things, wouldn't you?"

She drew a long breath.

"I'd forgotten," she said, awestruck at the notion of appearing on the little promenade in a skirt and man's coat much too large for her.

"Of course you had. Well, look here, I want you to wait here till dinner's over. You'd rather be here quietly by yourself than join the rackety party in the saloon, I dare say?"

"Oh yes-if I must," faltered the girl.

"Then I'll come back; Mrs. Franks will have got your own things ready for you, and I'll take you ashore myself."

"You're very good; very, very kind. I don't know how to thank you," murmured the girl, scarcely able to control her voice.

"Good! Oh no, I'm not. I've got a very bad character, and you have nothing to be grateful for."

She smiled incredulously.

"I should persist in being grateful, though," she said tremulously, "if you were as bad as—as Judge Jeffreys or —Lord Alford."

The young man stared at her in astonishment.

"And pray, what has Lord Alford done, for you to couple him with the local monster?" said he at last, speaking very quietly, and without any indication of the extreme personal interest the remark had for him.

"They're both local monsters, aren't they?" said she,

innocently. "One's dead and the other-"

"Ought to be, eh?"

₹**6**

"No, I was going to say 'one's dead and the other isn't."

"Rather rash of you to talk like that of living people, isn't it? Supposing I were to know him, and were to tell him what you said?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"As if it would matter-what I said!"

"I might even be Lord Alford, for all you know."

"He's in the Mediterranean, I happen to know."

"You seem to know a great deal about him!"

"Yes," said the girl, shortly. Then she frowned. "Don't let us talk about him. If—if you knew as much as I do about him, you'd know why!"

Lord Alford, who was standing near the door of the

cabin, said very quietly—

. "I can't help being interested in your modern Judge Jeffreys. Tell me just what you know." She hesitated. "Or, by the by, you haven't told me your own name?"

She drew back.

"I'd rather not, please," she said in a low voice. I'd rather you let me go just as I've come, as just—nobody."

"Very well. You don't mind letting me know your Christian name? Miss Mary or Miss Dorothy, or whatever it is, would sound better than Miss Nobody."

"Oh, it's Nellie."



31

"Very well, Miss Nellie, then I'll leave you in peace now, and see you again after dinner."

But instead of going to the saloon, Lord Alford went in search of Mrs. Franks, charged her strictly not to let her patient know on whose yacht she was, and then started again in the pinnace for the shore.

No sooner had he landed than he asked the way to Miss Baldock's school, and arriving there soon after dark, he easily guessed, from the moving figures in the garden, the lights carried about, and the voices full of suppressed excitement, that the flight of the unhappy Nellie had been discovered.

He at once asked to see Miss Baldock, and was shown into a little conventional drawing-room, where an ill-dressed and vulgar-looking woman, with reddish hair and a freckled face, who wore sandals instead of shoes, bounced into the room and demanded what he wanted.

"Am I speaking to Miss Baldock?" asked the Earl, quietly.

"Yes. Who are you? Why didn't you give your name?"

"Your household appears to be in some confusion, and I was not asked for it," said he. "I am Lord Alford."

Instantly the woman's manner changed, and she became as apologetic and obsequious as she had previously been uncivil.

He cut her explanations short.

"I came to tell you that one of your pupils attempted to commit suicide an hour or so ago, driven to it, I understand, by the treatment she received here. Probably I need not tell you which one it is."

Miss Baldock looked pale and alarmed.

"She certainly was never ill-treated," she exclaimed vehemently. "If she's told you that she was, it is a falsehood. I'm surprised that you should have anything to do with her, Lord Alford!"

"I saved her life; that's what I had to do with her. Now I want to know all about her, and why she was driven to take her own life. And I insist upon knowing."

Miss Baldock shrugged her shoulders with the exag-

gerated gesticulation of the underbred.

"Probably her schoolfellows had found out who she was, and that my fees for last term had not been paid. And as my school is very select, and the other girls are all gentlemen's daughters---"

"She concluded that the best way out of such select society was suicide? I see. And pray how much is she

in your debt?"

"Twenty-three guineas inclusive of what I lent her

"Never mind what for," said the young man, as he drew out his purse, took out some notes and gold, and counted it upon the table. "Now you are paid, and your select academy is purged of her presence. And I may tell you, madam, that whatever she may have done, or whoever she may be, your conduct in making her life unbearable to her is a disgrace to your sex."

Miss Baldock stared and laughed coarsely. She was not one of the old-fashioned prim school of teachers, who masked lack of refinement under elaborate affectation; but one of the new school, that makes open parade of the manners of the laundry, encourages slang and athletics, and rejoices in being very, very modern.

"I see the girl has deceived you as she deceives everybody," she said. "When you know who she is, your

philanthropy will have a shock, Lord Alford."

The young man turned quickly on his way to the door. Perhaps the icy chill of a sudden suspicion had seized him, for he was unable to speak.

"She is the daughter of a convict—of the man who robbed you of your family jewels!"



CHAPTER IV

To say that Lord Alford was shocked by this information is to understate the case. Not all the logic which proved that the daughter was in no way to blame for the father's misdeeds, not all the compassion he had felt for the victim of injustice whom he himself had saved, prevented his feeling a sensation of strong repulsion and resentment, as the old wound reopened upon this discovery.

He had suffered bitterly for the act of boyish folly by which he had lost such a considerable portion of his inheritance. And the remembrance of the wrong done him by the fraudulent solicitor seven years before was fresh and vivid still.

For he had behaved generously towards Alaric Smith, had been willing to believe his lame story, to overlook his offence, had even refused to make the peccant lawyer bankrupt and so, to some trifling extent, to reimburse himself.

And Smith, instead of feeling a spark of compunction, had remained obstinately persistent in his stupid story, even when it was disproved at every point. And he had added to his offence by refusing to give the least help towards the recovery of any portion of the jewels.

Since the day when John, Lord Alford had placed his precious bag in the lawyer's care in the Bath office, the Cannington jewels, with the exception of some thirty thousand pounds' worth which Smith had sold for less than half that sum, had utterly disappeared. The most rigorous search had failed to unearth, or to trace them.

34

The famous stone, the Countess's diamond, was among the property which had thus disappeared; and it was this fact, and Smith's obstinate refusal to admit that he had any idea where it was, which formed the strongest part of the indictment against him, proving as it did that he had been carried away by no sudden temptation into a crime which he afterwards repented, but that he had laid a deliberate plan to rob to the utmost extent of his power the lad who had been rash enough to trust him and generous enough to believe and to forgive him.

When Miss Baldock's words woke him to the truth that it was the daughter of Alaric Smith whose life he had saved, the Earl was for the first moment too utterly bewildered to answer.

The schoolmistress took advantage of the fact to go on with her accusations against Nellie.

"And I am sorry to say," she said, drawing herself up with a sort of self-satisfaction which made the young man writhe even at that moment, "that Nellie Smith is what they call a chip of the old block, without any sense of honour or gratitude towards the people who have been kind to her. She behaved badly to me, badly to her guardian. And I hope there is no need for me to advise you, Lord Alford, not to have anything at all to do with her now you know who she is."

"Of course not," muttered the young man. "Of course it would be pleasant for neither of us. I—I am glad to think," added he, quickly, "that she has no more idea who I am than I had who she was."

Miss Baldock smiled complacently.

"I hope I shall succeed in making her ashamed of herself this once," said she in a tone which suddenly woke him to compunction.

He turned again towards her.

"No," said he, shortly. "She won't come back to you. Whatever her father may have done, you have no right to visit his sins upon her."

35

"You must allow me to be the best judge of what is proper."

He became suddenly imperious.

"Oh no, I mustn't. I say she shall not come back here. I would take her away on my yacht sooner than allow it."

Miss Baldock was much shocked.

"You will do nothing of the kind. If you were to attempt it, I would get a magistrate's order and force you to deliver her up. I'm her guardian at present——"

But the Earl suddenly pointed to the money he had paid her, which still lay on the table.

"Yes, now you're paid !" said he, cuttingly.

And before she could recover from the momentary confusion into which the taunt cast her, he had dashed out of the room and let himself out of the house.

By the time he got back to the yacht he had worked himself into a state of some indignation against the girl who, not content with having robbed him of property of great value—for certainly she would share the ill-gotten gains of her father—had cast the worst aspersions upon his character.

Schoolgirl as she was, Nellie was old enough to know that her father had been guilty of a great crime, and it was little to her credit that, instead of burying the past in decorous silence, she should make the most monstrous if vague accusations against the man her father had so grievously wronged.

The Earl did not pride himself upon any great sublimity of character; he was aware that he was looked upon as wild, if not worse, and that his doings shocked the people in the neighbourhood of Heynes Hall, with whom indeed he had little in common. But Nellie had not contented herself with any mild accusations of that kind; she had spoken of Lord Alford as if he had been a disgrace to his name and to his order; and the young Earl, knowing what he now knew, boiled at the thought.

He was surprised, when the pinnace took him alongside

his yacht, to see that Nellie, once more in her own clothes, or in something resembling them, was standing on the deck; he was surprised also to see what a little slip of a girl she was, and how young she looked, with her hair tied together and hanging down to her waist. She was wearing a borrowed yachting cap, and her slim figure, in its dark clothes, looked willowy and graceful against the faint light in the west.

He softened a little in spite of himself, and as he clambered on deck, he looked at her askance, wondering whether she had heard who her rescuer and present guardian was.

Evidently Mrs. Franks had been loyal, however, for the

girl smiled and then looked anxious.

"I thought you were going to dinner! You said you were!" she said, in a low voice, as soon as he stood by her side. "Where have you been? Not to see—Miss Baldock?"

She hissed out the name under her breath.

He nodded.

"Yes, I have. And I spoke to her about her treatment of you. I gave her beans, I can tell you!"

"Oh! You shouldn't! But—well, I'm glad you did,

all the same. For she did deserve it; oh, she did!"

She looked at him furtively, and he guessed that she wanted to know how much he had learnt about herself. But he held his peace with an odd feeling of pity for the girlish-looking creature. There was quite a long pause, and then she said—

"May I go away now, back to the shore? I've made up my mind what to do, and you see I'm quite quiet now, and—and ready to look things in the face."

She seemed even younger in her earnestness than she had been before; almost a child.

All thought of reproaching her fled out of his mind, not because he now felt assured that she was blameless, but

because her youth, her friendlessness, touched him. At once he resolved that she should go without knowing who he was. What, after all, did her childish prejudices matter to him?

"Very well," said he, gently. "You shall go if you like. Come down into the pinnace, and we'll talk things over as we go."

She came a step nearer, and looked up into his face. She had not to look up far, for she was tall for a girl, and he was only of the middle height for a man.

"I just want to tell you first," she said, "what you've done for me."

"Oh, nonsense--"

"Listen. You must. You've made everything look different for me. You've changed the look of the world. I don't know who you are, for Mrs. Franks wouldn't even tell me your name, but I never thought that in all the world there were men as kind—kind right through as you are. Of course, you don't want to hear, and, of course, I can't say it properly. But I couldn't—oh, I couldn't go away without telling you what I feel. My heart would—would have burst if I hadn't!"

And as she spoke, the tears ran fast round the young girl's cheeks.

The Earl was so much moved that he could only nod, and shrug his shoulders, and move impatiently, and utter hasty and incoherent ejaculations. But she would not be interrupted; she went steadily on to the end, though with broken voice and streaming eyes.

Just when she had finished, and while they still stood side by side, a head with enormously fluffed out hair of a very bright, golden hue, appeared at the top of the companion-way, and a feminine voiced lisped out shrilly—

"Lord Alford, Lord Alford, where, oh, where are you?"

Nellie started back as if she had received an electric

shock, and then the anguish which appeared in her face was pitiful to see.

"Lord Alford! You!" she gasped.
He made a sign to her with his hand, and turned impatiently to the other woman.

"All right, all right, I'm coming," said he, irritably.

Then he turned again to Nellie.

But she had disappeared.



CHAPTER V

THE Earl was alarmed. Had Nellie jumped overboard? If she had been ready to take her own life before, would she not be in a still more desperate state now that she knew who he was, thinking what she did of him?

"Miss Smith! Nellie!" cried he, as he looked round him, and peered behind the wicker-chairs that encumbered

the after part of the deck.

There was no reply from the girl, but the little fluffyhaired woman who had been calling him, came nimbly up the remaining steps from below, with only one tiny dog under her arm, and with a saucy smile on her face.

"Miss Smith, or Nellie, has gone forward. You appear to have frightened her away, Jack!" said she, reverting from her more ceremonious address to the free use of his Christian name. "You seem very much taken up with that young person. We shall all begin to wish you'd saved us from drowning, since it makes you so nice!"

Though she smiled she did not look pleased, and there

was a certain malice in her light words.

"Forward, you say! She's gone forward? Thanks," said he, briefly, and without further ceremony he ran along the deck in search of the girl, whom he found hiding in a corner of the deck in the fore part of the yacht, shaking from head to foot, and scarcely able to speak.

"Come, come," said he, kindly; "don't look so frightened! I can tell you that you frightened me by running away like that. I was afraid you'd jump overboard. But you wouldn't do that, would you, now we've become such pals?"

She suppressed a sob.

"I—I can't get over it, over the shock of knowing— —who you are, and what—what I said to you!" gasped

the girl.

"Oh, well, you did surprise me a little. You were so very outspoken. But I don't bear any malice, and all I ask is that you should give me some explanation of how you came to have such a very, very bad opinion of me."

"Oh, don't ask me, please! Just look upon me as—as—anything you like, only don't ask me to talk about it. All I can say is I'm sorry, dreadfully, dreadfully sorry, I ever believed a word against you, now I know."

He laughed.

"That's all very well," said he; "but I can't be satisfied with that, you know. I don't deny I've never been a Sunday-school ornament, or a shining light of any kind. But—well—Judge Jeffreys!"

They were in a dark corner, where none of the yacht's brilliant lights threw their radiance; and all he could see of her face was that it looked wan and drawn.

"I was wrong, absurdly wrong, of course."

"You were. But how came you to be so absurdly wrong? Who told you such things? Are they the mere products of your own imagination? Come here and tell me."

He made her come forward into the bow, and a sailor, who was standing there, moved out of their way. The Earl seated himself on a coil of rope, after making her take the deck-chair which somebody had brought there. The poor child looked very uncomfortable as she sat on the edge of the chair and clutched the sides; every movement of the yacht, as she rode at anchor, seemed to vibrate through her sensitive frame.

"You wouldn't make me tell you," she said, while the

4 I

tears gathered again in her eyes, "if you knew how terrible it is for me to speak about it all."

"My dear girl, I know it is an awkward thing. But really I don't see how we can get things cleared up without some sort of explanation. I suppose it's a safe guess," he went on, lowering his voice, "to suggest that you've been taught to think ill of me because of what happened to your father?"

Her tears flowed fast again, and she nodded.

"Of course I know now," whispered she, brokenly, struggling to speak calmly and holding the sides of the chair more tightly than ever, "that it was because you didn't know the truth, because they wouldn't let you understand how impossible it was that my father should do anything mean or wicked."

Involuntarily the Earl drew himself up. Although this was a perfectly natural attitude for Alaric Smith's child to take up, it was such an absurd one that for the moment he felt too much put out to answer. There was a pause, and she looked at him furtively, and then she sighed.

"Of course," she said sadly, "you don't believe me. Why should you, when you've been taught to believe the exact reverse? I suppose you really think—you must really think—that he did steal your family jewels?"

He moved uneasily. There was such perfect confidence in her father's innocence in the girl, that he felt it brutal to try to undeceive her. After another pause he said gently—

"It's very difficult for me to talk to you about this. But—I must remind you of this—it was a jury who found your father guilty, not I, and a judge, not I, who sentenced him."

"I know that. But just tell me this: I am his only child, his only near relation. He loved me passionately; nobody.disputes that."

"I know, I know. It was that which made me so sorry to have to take proceedings, or rather to countenance them.

And remember, I wouldn't allow him to be made bankrupt. I wouldn't let them take what he had. And that was because of you, because of his child."

Nellie sobbed again.

"Yes, yes; but I didn't know that was your doing, and that it was for that. I thought—I thought—"

"What?"

42

"That it was because you knew in your heart of hearts that he was innocent."

He could not help smiling at this ingenuous notion.

"Well, go on with what you were saying. He loved you passionately."

"Yes. Now if he had stolen all that valuable property, do you, can you think he would have left me unprovided for through all these years that he—had to be away?" she finished euphemistically.

The Earl looked surprised and puzzled.

"Did he?" said he. "That is odd, certainly. But I thought you had a guardian?" He checked himself: "Excuse me. Of course I have no right—"

"I'd rather you knew everything. I want you to know everything," she said earnestly. "My father's partner, Mr. Bridger, is my guardian, but he is always impressing upon me, that it was he who paid for my schooling, out of charity; and since I refused to marry his son, he has paid nothing."

"The old rascal!"

"And in my father's letters—I get short letters from him regularly now—he tells me to get on with my studies, because we are so poor."

"Do you write to him?" asked the Earl, suddenly.

"Yes. But of course I don't tell him my troubles, for fear he should brood and fret. He's not at all strong, and I am always dreading what the next news of him will be," ended the girl, with trembling voice.

Lord Alford looked thoroughly interested and perplexed. "But your father had a house outside Bath," said he.



"Can't that be let and the rent applied for your benefit? That was the idea I had in my mind, when I told them not to make a claim against that."

"By his orders, it has been shut up ever since," said she. "Nobody goes into it but Mr. Bridger himself. There's not even a caretaker allowed in: she lives in the lodge, but she's not given charge of the keys."

"Extraordinary!" muttered Lord Alford.

And a strange thought darted through his mind, was it conceivable that Alaric Smith, through drugs, drink, or some kind of insanity, was not quite responsible for his actions? Had an injustice been done after all?

Perhaps the girl's eyes saw something of what was pa sing in his mind. She said quickly—

"That doesn't look like the act of a deliberate thief, does it?"

"By Jove, no! And you are actually left with nothing, nothing? What are you going to do? How are you going to live, if you won't go back to Miss Baldock's and if you won't have anything to say to the Bridgers?"

"I'll tell you. There's just one thing I can do: I can play, piano and harp, well, really well, and I can sing a little. I'm sure I could get an engagement as accompanist.

going to the London music-shops to try."

"By Jove! And how will you get along till you've got

the engagement?"

"Oh, I'm not quite destitute, though I haven't much My father gave me some old paste ornaments of my mother's which he said would be worth a great deal by the time I was grown up. I should dispose of them if I were obliged to. But I don't think I shall be. Oh dear!"

Her tone suddenly changed, and a look of blank dismay

overspread her face:

"What's the matter?"

"It's at Miss Baldock's—with all my things! hate to go for them. I won't go!" said she, rebelliously.

"Write her a letter demanding your things. And," added the Earl, with a mischievous look, "tell her to send them here, to the yacht!"

"Oh! shall I?"

He laughed.

"She'd be shocked, wouldn't she?"

Nellie bit her lip and looked demure. In truth the scandalous doings of the young Earl, who was one of the county notabilities, his pranks of various kinds, bets, debts, and so forth, were one of the standing sources of gossip of the neighbourhood.

"Well," said he, "let's shock her. It will do her good. Come and write to her, and tell her to have the trunks sent to the pier, c/o Lord Alford, SS. Gaiety Girl, and we shall have some fun."

nave some run.

Nellie began to smile, but suddenly her face broke up into a whimper.

"Oh, that I should ever have thought—ever have believed, that you were anything but noble and good!" said she in a husky whisper.

"Oh, rubbish! Now come down into the saloon, and I'll introduce you to the ladies. Don't be frightened if you find them rather—rather lively. There's no harm in them, and we've got a chaperon on board, Mrs. Dawes."

"I think I'd rather go ashore, please, so that I can start for London by the first train to-morrow morning," said Nellie, who had in truth been somewhat scandalized by the appearance of the fluffy-haired lady with the dog.

"And I think I'd rather you stayed," said Lord Alford,

peremptorily.

And like the spoilt boy he was, he had his own

way.

"Look here," he added in a low voice, as he led her towards the companion-way, "I can't lose sight of you yet. You've put all sorts of ideas into my head, and I feel that I must make some more inquiries. If I were to find—to



suspect, that any wrong had been done, that your father was guilty of nothing worse than carelessness after all——"

"Oh!" cried the girl, with sparkling eyes, clasping her

hands in a tumult of joy and gratitude.

"Mind, I only say 'if,' for I don't know," he went on warningly. "But if that were so, why, I'd—I'd—make amends."

Just for once a note of deep feeling sounded in the young man's usually careless tones, and Nellie was touched to the quick. Before she could give utterance to what she felt, he said more briskly—

"At least, you know, I could help you with your mother's old paste. I flatter myself I know something about such things—and I'd see that you were not cheated if you were to have to dispose of them"

were to have to dispose of them."

"I can't thank you!" said she, below her breath.

They were at the head of the stairs, and already the sound of laughter and merry voices came sharply upon their ears from below. Lord Alford put his hand upon her shoulder lightly.

"One moment, one word of warning," he whispered. "Don't let them know who you are. I mean—you know what I mean. You are just Miss Smith, Miss Nellie Smith, and—say an orphan."

She assented by a bend of the head, and they went down.

Dinner was served in the long saloon, and poor Nellie, in her dark dress, not improved by the dip or by the too hurried drying process which had followed, felt very much out of place among this merry band of laughing, gesticulating ladies, all talking at once, all dressed elaborately in evening blouses and trailing skirts, and all resplendent in jewellery.

Lord Alford introduced her to each member of the party, as the heroine of the accident by which she had slipped into the sea; but it was not until she had sat quietly,

first in one corner and then in another, during the whole of what seemed to her a very long, bewildering evening, that she was able to remember which was which.

She was placed by Lord Alford on his left hand, the portly Mrs. Dawes, chaperon in chief, being always on his right. But he was considerate enough to see that she was scarcely herself yet, and to trouble her with very little conversation beyond what was absolutely necessary.

She had plenty of time, therefore, to watch, listen and observe; and she soon found out that the handsomest of the young ladies, the daughter of Mrs. Dawes, a splendid brunette with a lazy manner, and hair, much fluffed out, of a very peculiar shade of bronze, was the one who considered herself entitled to the largest share of the host's attention.

She called him "Jack" and he called her "Mollie," and she was, upon the whole, the quietest member of the party. Nellie thought she was rather stupid, but liked her better than the lady who was evidently much cleverer, and whom they all addressed either as "Mrs. Long" or as "Vall." This was the tiny lady with the small sly eyes, the much fluffed-out fair hair, and the dogs.

The other two ladies were Lena Talbot, a tall darkhaired girl with a hoarse voice and good-humoured manner, and Lena Lee, who was of the middle height, golden-haired, very pretty, but with no other very salient feature. They were all on the stage except Mrs. Long, who was a concertsinger, and who looked down upon the others.

There were three men besides Lord Alford.

The first was Barrett Browne, "horsey" all over, good-looking, slangy, noisy. There was Major Marshall, a well-dressed quiet man, whose thin hair was probably dyed as well as his thick moustache; both were of raven blackness. There was Mr. Ferrers, whom everybody addressed as "Ned," a jolly, red-faced old man with shrewd eyes, who kept the fun alive, smoothed over points of friction, and was evidently a bon vivant as well as a man of tact.



47

Nellie decided that she hated Major Marshall, and that she like Ned Ferrers. Also that she disliked all the woman, but Lena Talbot the least.

And she had a shrewd suspicion, which deepened into certainty as the evening wore on, that all the guests were very expensive ones, that there was rivalry between Mollie Dawes and Mrs. Long, and that all the guests regarded the quiet little intruder with jealousy and suspicion.

As all the rest played bridge after dinner, Nellie had further opportunities of observation, and she noticed that, whenever she looked at the major, he frowned and seemed uneasy. So she watched him, and presently saw something which made her heart leap up, and the colour rush to her cheeks.

She was almost sure that he was cheating.

However that might be, he presently changed his seat to one where she could not see his hands so well; and when the play was over, at a very late hour, Nellie, who had been kept awake rather by her doubts of her company than by anything else, learnt that he had won a considerable sum, more than any one else, in fact.

She learnt, also, that the ladies had won on the whole, and that the only heavy loser was Lord Alford.

She wondered how he could tolerate this crowd of hungry, greedy hangers-on, for such she considered them to be; and she would have been interested, if not astonished, to hear the criticisms which were freely passed upon herself when she withdrew, pale and heavy-eyed, and took possession of the little cabin which she was thankful to find she was to have all to herself.

Lord Alford, kind as ever, had followed her out of the saloon to express a hope that she felt none the worse for the long evening after her unpleasant "dip." She dared not say anything of what was in her mind, but she felt so deeply overcome with the various feelings of gratitude for his kindness and generosity, and pity for the folly which suffered

these greedy followers to gather round and prey upon him, that she could scarcely find even the most commonplace words in answer to his questions.

"You're tired," said he. "I feel guilty for having let you stay up. We're a rackety crew, aren't we?"

She could only smile and shake her head. The matter was one upon which she dared not trust herself to speak.

Meanwhile, she had been passed under review by the group in the saloon.

"Well, what do you think of Jack's new find?" asked Major Marshall, in a rather jeering tone to Miss Dawes.

Mollie frowned lazily.

"She seems a stupid, quiet little girl," said she. "I hardly noticed her."

"Lord Alford did, though," said the Major, in a lower voice. "You mark my words, that demure little humbug had her eyes upon you all, and one of these fine days you'll find yourselves all cut out."

"'She gives a side-glance and looks down," quoted old Ned Ferrers. "Are you afraid of the quiet ones, Marshall? She seems a harmless little girl enough, and she's off in the morning. Back to school, I understand."

Mrs. Long laughed brightly and not without malice.

"That remains to be seen," she said. "School will seem dull after the Gaiety Girl. I'll bet you, I'll bet anybody a pair of gloves she stays."

"Done!" cried Barrett Browne, who was never known to refuse an offer of a bet. "Miss Demure has been frightened by all you screaming, chattering women!"

They all scolded him at the top of their voices; but Mrs. Dawes, who generally got very sleepy after the whisky and water which she consumed in a corner while the rest were at cards, nodded her head slowly two or three times, and said in a portentously solemn tone—

"The Major's right. I don't like your quiet ones. They're too knowing by half, too knowing by half!"

49

On the following morning Nellie was early astir, and she was on deck before any one but the crew was about. Lord Alford himself was the first member of the party to join her, and at once she begged that she might be taken ashore.

"Before any of the others are up," she whispered hurriedly.

"What! Don't you like 'the others'?"

"N-n-not much."

He laughed merrily.

"I suppose they make more noise than all your school-fellows put together."

"Yes."

"Well, you must go if you wish. There's a boat going ashore for letters and provisions. I'll take you to the pier myself. Now tell me," he went on, when they were down in the boat together and on their way through the blue water in the morning sunlight, "what are you going to do first?"

"I'm going to get my trunks—there are only two—and drive to the station, where I shall take a ticket for Bath. There I mean to see Mr. Bridger——"

"Good."

"And to see the house that has been shut up so long."

"Good again. You're not quite a goose, Nellie."

She blushed and laughed a little.

"Then I'm going to London, as I told you. My great ambition is to work and get together some sort of little home, no matter how small, where I may nurse my father back to health, when "—her voice faltered—"when he comes back."

"Very good indeed," said Lord Alford.

But before he could say more, he heard her draw a deep breath, and looking towards the pier, which they were now rapidly approaching, he saw Miss Baldock, with a very red face and angry eyes, standing beside the girl's two small

trunks, talking to a gentleman in clerical dress, at sight of whom Nellie uttered the words—

"The Vicar!"

50

"The devil!" said Lord Alford. "What has he gotto do with it? Never mind, we must brave the Church, too. Here goes!"

And the pinnace having slowed down beside the old wooden structure, Lord Alford leaped on to the landing-stage, and raising his cap to Miss Baldock, said—

"Are these Miss Smith's trunks, madam?"

The school-mistress gave an angry and expressive glance at the Vicar, and said to Nellie, who, trembling and pale, got ashore with difficulty—

"I wonder that you had not more sense of propriety than to ask me to send your things to Lord Alford's yacht!"

"Where else should she send them, madam, since you drove her out of your house, and I gather that she hasn't a friend in the world?" cried the young man, hotly.

"It's not true. If she says so, it's not true. I've been a good friend to her, and I demand that she shall come back with me. The Vicar knows me, and knows that I do my duty to all the girls under my care, and——"

The Vicar, a pleasant-looking little gentleman, with a mild face and well-bred manner, held up his hand depre-

catingly.

"Don't let us get too warm about this," he said gently, but with authority. "Miss Nellie, I'm sure you know better than to suppose that Miss Baldock wished to drive you away. I hope you will go back to Bay View like a good girl."

But she astonished him with the force and emphasis with which she replied—

"Never. I will never go back to her; never."

"But don't you known who Lord Alford is, and do you mean to say you prefer the company of a lot of ballet-girls to ours?" almost screamed Miss Baldock.



51

The Vicar looked shocked; Lord Alford looked "nasty."

"And supposing," said the latter, quietly, "that she does prefer Lord Alford and the ballet-girls, and chooses them as better friends than you. What then?"

Miss Baldock shook with rage.

"Let her choose. Let her choose," gasped she.

The Vicar in vain tried to calm her, assured her that Lord Alford had saved the girl's life, and was a friend indeed to her unlucky pupil. Even he was shocked when the girl, breaking in upon the discussion, said in a clear voice—

"I do choose. I choose Lord Alford. I can trust him to treat me, to treat all his friends, too well. I can't trust you, Miss Baldock."

The Vicar tried to expostulate, Miss Baldock tried to shout her into submission. But Nellie was firm. Lord Alford cut the matter short.

"This is very distressing for you, sir," he said courteously to the Vicar. "Take my word for it, I will treat this young lady as you would treat your own sisters and daughters." He turned to one of his crew and pointed to the trunks. "Take those trunks on board, and give them into Mrs. Franks' care. And now, Miss Smith, I will see you off on your journey, and I will have your trunks sent on as soon as I hear from you."

And raising his cap, he hurried Nellie down the pier, put her into a fly, and drove with her to the station.

"This is all rather unconventional," said he, with a pleasant touch of consideration for her which made him grave, "but I must see you off."

The Vicar, however, had followed them up in his chaise, and he waylaid Lord Alford at the station, and held him in grave conversation while poor Nellie, seeing her train coming in, thought it best to take her ticket and escape even at the risk of seeming ungracious to Lord Alford.

52

She had scarcely, however, gone on to the platform, when she was met face to face, on turning round to see whether the gentlemen were still talking, by a man at the sight of whom she shivered in spite of herself.

A tall, thin, pale, shabby man, dressed in light grey clothes which had once been good, but which were now baggy at the knees, frayed, soiled, and almost ragged: a man not more than thirty or so years of age, not ill-looking, and with a certain air of belonging to a class considerably above that to which circumstances had now reduced him.

There was nothing uncanny, nothing repulsive about the man, yet Nellie could have screamed with alarm at the sight of him.

For she had seen him, furtive and shabby, hanging about the house when she was at school in London; she had seen him lurking in the neighbourhood of Bay View, shabbier still. Now it seemed to her that the suspicions she had had before that it was she whom he was following, haunting, must be correct. For as her startled eyes met his, his face flushed, and he looked away in a hangdog manner.

The train was in the station; she got into a first-class compartment, thinking that she would pay the difference rather than run the risk of travelling with him. That he would not have a first-class ticket she knew.

To her horror he jumped into the same compartment. She could not have defined the dread she felt, but it was insurmountable. Darting out upon the platform, she was instantly followed by the man; the train was almost empty. She called the guard, and asked him to find her a second-class compartment with ladies in it. Even as she spoke, however, her object was gained, and by the time she was in the train, the man in the shabby grey suit was slinking back to the station door.

Then, as the train started, he did a strange thing: raising his right hand to his face, he smoothed first one



53

eyebrow and then the other, with an odd sweep of the fingers.

Her heart leapt up, and she could have called to him. For it was a favourite gesture of her father's, and she knew that the man in grey had a message for her from him.

What was it?

CHAPTER VI

NELLIE sat back in the railway carriage with her brain in a whirl.

Hers had been, with the exception of the one great break in her life, when her mother died, and she was sent to school at the age of ten, a life of outward routine without any break of action until now.

The terrible blow of her father's conviction for fraud had fallen when she was but eleven years of age, and she was at that time in such kind hands that she had not been allowed to feel its force.

Even when Joel Bridger had removed her from that school to Miss Baldock's cheaper one, her life had been still one of school routine, and the misery she had been made to suffer had not interfered with the daily round of work.

Now, therefore, that she was, in this summary and unexpected manner, thrown out upon the world, her daily task done with, and her mind strangely opened to the fact that there were other sorts of life outside the school walls, she felt very much as a cloistered nun would feel flung out suddenly into the storm and stress of active life. For the first time she left off brooding upon the wrongs done to her father and to herself, and began to think with a mind which seemed to have suddenly become wider, stronger.

The bird had escaped from its cage, and was still fluttering with astonishment at the fact. But already it looked out over the landscape, and saw that things looked different from what they had done behind the bars.



55

That the Lord Alford, whom she had always looked upon as the vilest of men, the relentless persecutor of the innocent, should have proved to be the gentlest, most generous and kindest creature she had ever known, was alone sufficient to give her food for thought.

That a man who had suddenly installed himself as the hero of her dreams could content himself with the society of such people as she had met on the yacht was another

amazing problem.

And, lastly, there was the mystery of the shabby man in the light suit to fill her with vague wonder and dread. That he would find her at last, this man who had evidently been on the watch, both a year ago in London and a month ago in Bay View, for a chance of speaking with her alone, she felt quite sure.

That he had a message to give her from her father she felt quite sure.

Some instinct, strong, unaccountable, made her dread the coming meeting.

By the time she arrived in Bath another problem was troubling her, and she began to wonder for the first time why her father had refused to allow his new house to be sold or let. She was now in the mood to take nothing for granted, as she had previously done, and she determined to catechise Mr. Bridger on the subject.

This was her very first visit to the lawyer's office, and as she went up the steps and saw the brass plate with the name "Bridger and Bridger," instead of the old title, "Smith and Bridger," it gave her a pang of shame that

brought the tears to her eyes.

When she asked for Mr. Bridger she was shown into the presence, not of the old solicitor, but of his son, and the meeting caused embarrassment on both sides, for neither had seen the other since it had been intimated to Nellie that Bram wished to make her his wife, and she had intimated back that the wish was not reciprocated.

"Oh!" said both, and then there was a moment's silence.

"It was my father you wished to see, I suppose?" suggested Bram, who was a long, lean, stooping, shambling creature, with a knot of stubborn ginger-coloured hair that stood out on his forehead, and a jaw that protruded far too much.

"Yes. Can I see him?"

"Well, he's not here to-day." A pause. "Is there

anything I can do for you?"

"Yes," snapped Nellie, with a sudden determination to take the bull by the horns. "You can tell me why you wanted to marry me, when I'm sure you don't like me any better than I like you. And why, when I said 'No,' which you ought to have been very glad of, your father instantly left off paying my school fees."

The challenge was such a downright one that there was no edging away from it. Bram looked at her furtively and with fear, and presently answered with caution—

"It was his doing, you know, not mine."

"Well, why did he do it? There must have been some reason!"

Bram rubbed his large chin, and then pulled his ginger forelock, and twisted it neatly round his forefinger.

"I'm sure I don't know what his reason was," he said at last, half meekly, half sullenly. "He didn't tell me."

Nellie frowned suspiciously, and persisted.

"Do you mean to tell me that you were ready to marry a girl you don't care for, to please your father, without knowing the reason?"

Bram shuffled his feet.

"Well, it would have been a way of providing for you!" he said at last, desperately.

Nellie shook her head and laughed a little, scornfully.

"You've all grown very philanthropic!" she said dryly.



"But it would have been more to the purpose to pay Miss Baldock, and to let me marry whom I pleased."

"You're welcome to, as far as I'm concerned," rejoined

Bram, sullenly.

Anything less like the wounded feeling of a rejected lover than this dry brevity it was impossible to imagine. Nellie was frankly perplexed.

She looked at him as if he had been a new and rare

specimen of foreign animal.

Then she grew saucy. The emancipated schoolgirl awoke within her, and she said—

"Come now, Mr. Bram, won't you tell me what your real inducement was? It wasn't my beauty, I'm sure."

He frankly threw at her a disdainful look.

"Of course it wasn't."

"Was it-my wealth?"

To her amazement, the playful question made him start violently, and sit up in his chair.

"What do you mean?"

Surprised and startled in her turn, Nellie was silent, and the blood rushed to her face.

Bram recovered himself, and said drily-

"I didn't know you had any money, Miss Smith."

Stung by his uncivil manner, Nellie said-

"Of course I'm not rich. But there's a house belonging to my father, which I suppose will be mine some day. And by-the-by, Mr. Bram, can you tell me why my father refused to allow it to be sold or let?"

Bram grew very red, fidgeted with his pen and said, after a little hesitation—

"I'm sure I don't know, I don't suppose my father knows. Sentimental reasons, I suppose."

"I'm going over it-" began Nellie.

Bram checked her at once with great peremptoriness.

"You must wait, then, till my father can take you over himself. He keeps the keys."

Nellie looked at him narrowly. What was the mystery about this house? Where was the objection to her going over it? She began, inexperienced as she was, to see that there was something wrong somewhere, and that Bram was anxious to keep her away from the house.

"There's a caretaker, isn't there?"

"She's not allowed inside. Your father's orders were most peremptory, that nobody was to be allowed inside the house. It's of no use for you to go there by yourself therefore; you would simply be told that you must apply to my father."

"I see. And when will he be here?"

"Oh, to-morrow, I dare say."

"Thank you. Then I'll come to-morrow, and ask him to take me."

Bram leapt up from his chair, much relieved.

"Yes. That's right. I'll tell him to expect you. Good morning."

In his open joy at getting rid of her, he was almost civil.

As for Nellie, she saw so keenly the humour of this interview with a man whom she had been told to consider in the light of a lover, that as she went down the steps she laughed to herself, and was in better spirits than she had been for months.

The little minx had no idea of waiting until the next day, as she had let Bram think she meant to do. Her curiosity was aroused about the house, and as it was still early, she had a hasty luncheon in the true schoolgirl taste, of a bath bun and a bottle of lemonade, and started on foot for The Firs.

The house was between three and four miles out of the town, and stood in a modest half-dozen acres, with a tiny lodge at the entrance, and so well shrouded with trees that even in winter little could be seen of the building itself.



Nellie's heart beat fast as she approached the high stone walls which shut in the house in which she had only spent one short holiday, but in which both she and her father had taken so much pride.

It was with a good many strange and for the most part painful emotions, that she went up to the great iron gates and pulled the rusty iron chain which communicated with a bell inside the lodge.

She was struck already by the terrible air of neglect that was over everything. The gates were rusty and grown up with weeds; it was plain that only the little side-gate for foot-passengers had been opened in all these seven shut-up years.

The sense of shame grew strong upon her when she remembered that she must now meet, for the first time since her father's conviction, the old woman who had been their

servant in the days of their honour.

The lodge door opened, and Mrs. Barr came out. Nellie, who had not seen her since she was a child of eleven, recognized her at once. She was a little more bent, a little more wrinkled, but she looked as honest, as goodnatured and as cheerful as ever.

The young girl waited for her to speak. Mrs. Barr came to the gate and peered through the bars. An exclamation broke from her lips.

"My gracious! If it isn't Miss Nellie!"

The next moment the gate was unlocked, and the girl, with heartfelt thankfulness, found herself dragged into the cottage, placed in a chair by the blinking fire, and overwhelmed with kindly attentions.

"Well, you might ha' knocked me down with a feather, Miss Nellie, when I see as how it was you! To think of your coming out her, after all this time, all by yourself like that! Well there, if only my good man was to see you settin' there, he'd say, as he always does, as it seemed as if it was to be !"

"I'm—I'm so glad you knew me!" whispered the girl. "I—I was so afraid I should have to explain!"

"Know you! Bless your heart, I'd have known you anywhere. Though to be sure, miss, you've come on in looks since I see you last, for all you were a nice-looking child then, begging your pardon for the liberty. But to see you growed up and quite a woman like—why, it do make one feel old, miss."

"Have you been living here—ever since, Mrs. Barr?"

"Yes, miss, never been away for hardly a day. My old man he works at the farm down below, and I look after things here."

"Is it true you haven't got the keys of the house?"

"Quite true, miss. Mr. Bridger he keeps them hisself, and he won't let nobody inside the door but hisself. It's a real pity too, for the place never gets a airing, and I know all that beautiful furniture must be going to rack and ruin, let alone there's nobody to find out when a slate gets loose or a pipe starts leaking. And there's green marks down the walls will break you heart to see!"

"It's all very strange!" said Nellie.

"Ay, so it is, miss, and I think poor Mr. Smith must have been well nigh off his 'ead with misery when he said it was to be left so. And as for Mr. Bridger, if I was him I'd not be so particular about keeping to Mr. Smith's exact instructions; for by the time your poor papa comes back, miss, ten to one there'll not be a thing in the house fit for use, and the place itself will be tumbling about his ears!"

"How often does Mr. Bridger come to look over it?"

asked Nellie, abruptly.

"That's more than I can tell you, for he lets hisself in, most times, by a little door in the wall round by the farm yonder."

"And has no attempt ever been made to get in by anybody else?"

"Not as I know of. We keep off the boys by saying

61

the place is 'aunted. There was a man hanging about here a few days ago, so my old man said, as he didn't like the looks of. But John follered him off and a good way down along the road, and we've seen nothink of him since."

"I'm going to get in myself if I can," said Nellie, with

determination. "I have a right to, at any rate."

"To be sure you have, miss. Though I don't know how you'll manage it without the key. For I must tell you Mr. Bridger has taken precautions, and made the lower part fast all round."

"Have you got a ladder?"

"Yes. And we keep it indoors, for fear it should be used by them as hasn't the right," said Mrs. Barr, with a shrewd nod.

"Let me have that, and I'll see if I can't get in by the upper floor."

Between them they got the ladder, which was of no great length, out of the passage of the lodge, and carried it up the winding drive, with a high yew hedge on one side, and a plantation on the other, that led to the house.

The hedge had been neglected, as Mrs. Barr apologetically explained, when the boughs threatened to form a serious obstacle in their path. They straggled, indeed, right across the drive, and met the untrimmed branches of the lilacs and laburnums on the other side. Below the gravel was green with moss, and damp with heaps of decayed leaves. The accumulation of years lay there, making the ground soft and sodden, and filling the air with the peculiar acrid smell of rotting vegetation.

The journey up the long drive was depressing in the extreme, and by the time the wide open gravelled space before the house was reached, Nellie was, for the fourth or fifth time that day, on the verge of tears.

A cold shiver passed through her when she looked at the house which she remembered so cheerful and homelike, with its big drawing-room window full of flowers. Now the windows were shuttered and dirty; the walls were stained with damp, and grass grew thick on the gravel and round the step of the front door.

A most unpretentious building it was, rambling back on the east side, with a long range of windows, up to the ceiling and down to the ground.

These looked out upon the flower-garden, now a rank mass of tall grass and weeds. Nellie could just see over the top of this tangle the trees of the paddock behind the house.

On the west side was a paved court-yard, grass-grown and full of pools, with the servants' quarters on one side and the stables on the other. And facing the yard was a kitchen garden with an orchard behind. Here trespassers had played havoc with the neglected fruit, and downtrodden bushes and boughs lay thick among the weeds.

Nellie glanced at the wreck of a spot which she had once thought the prettiest on earth, and, directing Mrs. Barr to accompany her again to the eastern side of the house, she planted the little ladder in the tangle of various kinds where once a flower-border had been, and mounted to one of the upper windows, while Mrs. Barr kept anxious watch below.

Although she had felt unable to refuse admittance to Nellie, she knew that she would get into trouble with Mr. Bridger if he should discover the help she had given to the girl, and Nellie saw her glance apprehensively to right and left as she held the ladder firm.

The girl tried in vain to move the catch with an old knife which she had brought from the lodge.

"I shall smash the glass!" she cried impatiently.

"Oh, Miss Nellie, hadn't you better wait?" asked Mrs. Barr, looking up with imploring eyes. "I shouldn't like—you wouldn't like—Mr. Bridger to think——"

Nellie turned and stooped to speak to her.

"Look here, Mrs. Barr, I'm not afraid. But I don't



63

want to get you into trouble. I'm going to smash the window. But as soon as I've got in, you may run away, and I'll manage to bring the ladder back to the lodge myself."

And turning, she forced in the window with the handle of her umbrella, and began to break away the glass to make a space large enough to admit her person.

Mrs. Barr grew paler than ever as she looked at the

damage done.

"Look here, Miss Nellie, I can't leave you to bring the ladder back by yourself," she said, in a loud whisper. "But I'll just go back to the lodge for a bit to see all's safe there, and then I'll come back and help you fetch it away when you've done."

"All right."

Nellie was by this time in the house, on the landing near the principal staircase, shivering a little, and already hearing odd creakings and crackings in the deserted home. Although she put on a bold air, and smiled and nodded good-bye to Mrs. Barr, who was anxious to be gone, she felt a strange thrill of longing and of loneliness as she watched the old woman's broad figure waggling slowly down the gravel space, and disappearing between the over-grown boughs across the drive.

She felt reluctant to leave the broken window, through which at least she could inhale the healthy outer air.

But still, now that she had got in, she felt that she must satisfy her curiosity as to the condition in which the place was; and stealing away from the window as furtively as if she had been engaged upon some questionable action, Nellie began her tour of inspection.

The first thing she noticed was that the carpet on the landing was loose, as if it had been taken up and then laid down again without being nailed. When she entered one of the bedrooms she noticed the same thing. She saw also that, while her father's order that everything was to be left

just as it was when he quitted the house had been strictly observed, in the sense that even the bedclothes had been left on the beds and the lace-trimmed and embroidered covers on chests and dressing-tables, the place had not been left wholly undisturbed. In every room she entered the furniture was a little out of place, the rugs were awry, the chairs were pulled away from the walls, the pictures were on one side.

At the same time, although there was dust in plenty, it was not the undisturbed dust of years, and the rooms had not the close, stale atmosphere of a long-shut-up house.

Mr. Bridger it must be, she supposed, who was responsible for this state of things; evidently he made a periodical examination of everything. Even the little jewel-drawers of the dressing-tables had been pulled out, and the mattresses turned over to keep them aired.

She went downstairs, reluctantly, for while the upper rooms were still light, although it was dusk, the lower floor was boarded and shuttered up for security, and she had to grope about in the gloom until she was lucky enough to come upon a box of matches and a candle in a candlestick on the hall-table.

Of these, no doubt left by Mr. Bridger on his latest visit, she at once availed herself, and striking a match, she lit the candle, and entered the drawing-room.

Here the confusion she had noticed upstairs was more apparent still. A sofa lay overturned near the middle of the room, and a large piece had apparently been hewn out of the beautiful mantelpiece in white enamel, with an oil-painting in an oval frame above, which she remembered to have admired heartily in her childhood.

Strips of paper had been torn off the walls in places, and the carpet, having been pulled up all round, was rolled into strange shapes among the chair-legs.

From astonished, Nellie grew angry, puzzled, suspicious.

What sort of care was this that had spoilt the very things it was supposed to cherish?

She hastened out of the drawing-room, and entered the dining-room. The same sort of treatment had been meted out to the furniture there. A part of the frame of the great oak dining-table had been hacked away very unskilfully; while to judge by appearances, the very hearth-stone had been forced up out of its place and then dumped down again with no great care.

She next visited the study, a long, delightful room in the old days, with windows on two sides. Here the utmost confusion reigned among the books which had been her father's pride. Old books in brown covers; new books in bright bindings; all lay together in heaps about the floor,

the chairs and the tables, together with papers and periodicals, guns, pictures and writing-implements.

On the table stood a clock, which had been taken to pieces and never put together again.

The great glazed book-cases, with their doors vawning open, were empty, and even they, heavy as they were, had been pulled out of position and no longer stood firmly in

their places against the wall.

Such a wreck was amazing, inexplicable. It looked like the work of a madman, and could not possibly be the result of a serious and organized attempt to keep the place aired and free from damp.

Nellie raised the candle high with a shudder. Anything more strange than this ruin and wreckage of books and pictures, these piles of volumes thrown down in all positions,

some open, some shut, she had never seen.

Quickly escaping from the study she opened the last of the rooms on the ground-floor, a smaller apartment at the end of a dark and narrow passage. The little snuggery had been given to her by her father as her own private study: and child as she then was, she had taken the utmost pride in its possession. It had two windows, but they were high

65

in the wall, as they overlooked the stable-yard and were used, therefore, to give light but not a view to the room.

It was an oddly shaped little room with a deep recess where, to her great joy, there still stood her little schoolroom piano, a present which she had only enjoyed a month when the great crash came.

She ran towards it with a low cry, instinctively recalling her pleasure in its possession seven years ago. But to her horror the hand of the unknown devastator had been at work there too; on throwing back the lid, she found that the keys had been torn out bodily, leaving it a mere empty shell full of wires tangled and twisted out of shape.

The sight drew from her lips another low cry. She stood back, bewildered, aghast.

Had some madman found his way into the house, and wreaked his imbecile rage upon everything upon which he could lay hands? Was Mr. Bridger's enthusiastic care only a pretence and a sham? Had he never been near the place at all during the whole of the seven years?

Nellie remembered that Mrs. Barr admitted she seldom saw him, that he got in by a side-door, and not through the principal gate. Perhaps he never came at all! She would go to his office on the following day and boldly tax him with his neglect. She would challenge him to come with her to the poor, abandoned home, and to see the result of his failure to keep faith with his unhappy partner!

She staggered back from the poor little instrument and looked round at the walls. The pictures had been taken down here also, and they were piled anyhow upon the little writing-table under the further window. Her old child's books, "The Wide, Wide World," "Little Women," "Robinson Crusoe," and the rest, together with the hanging shelves on which they had stood, were on the floor, where they had evidently been trampled upon by a careless foot.

She picked them up tenderly, placed them with almost



67

caressing fingers on the table by the wall, and crept out of the room with an ever-increasing sense of dread.

Who had done all this? When was it done? How was it that Mr. Bridger had never found it out?

Rendered nervous and miserable by her discoveries, the girl went back along the narrow passage with her hand round the candle-flame, and her eyes instinctively searching the dark corners, until she reached the hall. There, at the foot of the front staircase she stopped short, holding her breath. For there came to her ears quite clearly a sound which was not the scuttling away of mice in the skirting-boards, nor the creaking of the dry wood under her feet. It was the sound of a heavy weight being dropped on the floor of the kitchen.

She listened, breathless and horror-struck. She heard the sound of a man's heavy breathing. Chilled with fear, Nellie asked herself whether the unknown madman who had done all the damage was still in the house. Was he living there? Who—what was he?

CHAPTER VII

BLOWING out her light, Nellie crept on tiptoe to the door of the kitchen, stooped and looked through the keyhole.

There was a candle on the table, and against the light of this she saw a white shirt-sleeve and a hand holding a carpenter's tool.

That was all she could see, except this: that the hand was not that of an artisan, but the delicate hand of a man unused to rough work.

The next minute she heard a sound like the grating of a file against stone, and afterwards the falling of another heavy weight.

She stood back, scarcely daring to breathe, asking herself who this could be, and what the object was of the systematic destruction which was evidently being carried on in the house from garret to cellar.

Was it some enemy of her father's who had taken this mean and despicable way of revenging himself for some real or fancied wrong? The work of devastation must have gone on for a long time, since she had found the dust lying thick, for instance, on the books in the study. If such a thing were conceivable, however, that a man should go into a shut-up house time after time and give himself seriously to the task of destroying all the property he could lay his hands on, Nellie thought that he would not proceed in this slow manner, but would leave more signs of the deliberate malice of his intentions.

For, on second thoughts, it occurred to her to think that

69

the condition of the house showed more of wilfully made disorder than of actual damage. When she had found a table or a chair overturned, it had not been smashed; the glass remained in the book-cases, the leaves were untorn in the books. It was only here and there, in the broken piano, the injured table and defaced mantelpiece, that any attempt seemed to have been made to do more than turn the place upside down.

Clearly, then, the doer of the damage must be a lunatic. It did not take her very long to come to that conclusion, as she stood back, horrorstruck and crouching, in a far corner of the hall, listening to the sounds in the kitchen, and wondering whether she dared venture up the stairs again.

She wanted to go out by the way she had come, to call Mrs. Barr, and to get help to elucidate the mystery. She would have liked to knock at the kitchen door and boldly ask who was there, but her courage failed her when she told herself that, whether the intruder were thief or madman, he would be more likely to take the aggressive than to flee away in terror at the thought of detection.

As these thoughts passed rapidly through her mind, she was startled by a loud noise, like the falling of a quantity of bricks and plaster. Profiting by the opportunity as soon as she had recovered from her first alarm, Nellie ran up the stairs, and had reached the bend when, with a fresh pang of alarm, she heard a noise in another direction, and realized that some one was coming up the ladder by which she had herself entered the house.

Was it Mrs. Barr? She had almost decided to run up to the window in this belief, when she recollected that elderly women of Mrs. Barr's proportions have a wholesome fear of any means of entering a house but the doorway, and resolving to be on her guard against surprise, she ran quickly up the few remaining stairs, and hid herself in a little recess of the corridor on the right hand, just outside the door of the bedroom that had once been her own.

Then she heard some one at the broken window, and a voice, an unknown man's voice, call—

"Anybody there?"

70

Her heart leapt up to her mouth. Who was this? And what did he want? She shrank further into her corner and remained as still as a mouse.

She could see nothing of the new-comer from where she was, but she could hear him getting over the window-ledge and coming with soft tread along the landing.

Which way would he turn? Should she scream, in the hope of frightening him, if he should discover her?

Even while she put these questions to herself, the man, who was quick and light of foot, reached the head of the stairs, turned to the right, and opened the door of the first room he came to.

Then he went in, leaving the door open, and Nellie heard him overturning the furniture, whether by accident or design she could not tell, and calling out—

"Where are you, eh? Come out, come out. I won't hurt you."

It was almost as if he were calling to herself! And for a moment Nellie asked herself whether he were some one sent by Mrs. Barr to afford her any help she might need in opening doors or shuttered windows. But she did not feel sure enough of this to make her presence known, and when the unknown had opened a second door and entered in the same way, she took a bold resolution. Having ascertained that the door of her old bedroom was locked, with the key left on the outside, she unlocked it, went inside, and inserting the key on the inner side, turned it, and having thus made herself secure for the time at least, ran to the window, to find out what her chances of escape by that means might be.

Once more she heard him call out—

"Where are you? Don't be frightened. I'm a friend." And, having looked out through the dusty window and



71

realized the hopelessness of a descent from it without a ladder, she went back to the door to listen.

The unknown voice repeated the words more loudly than before, and then Nellie heard a door on the ground-floor open, and some one come out into the hall.

It must be the man who had been at such strange work in the kitchen!

Were these two men friends?

A dead silence had succeeded to the noise of the opening door and the heavy tread below. Nellie held her breath in dread of what was going to happen. These men were not friends, she felt sure. Who were they?

What were they doing in her father's abandoned house?

Strain her ears as she would, no sound reached them for what seemed a long time but the soft creaking of the boards of the landing and of the stairs. She felt sure that, in the obscurity, the man upstairs and the man below were moving about, each on the watch for the movements of the other.

Then the handle of the door of the room she was in was softly tried: she clenched her hands tightly, her face cold and wet with terror. But the would-be intruder, finding the door locked, made no attempt to force it, but went creaking away down the corridor to the right as softly as ever.

There was another long pause. Nellie wondered what had become of the men, whether they were out of hearing and the way clear for her to make a rush for the ladder. It must surely now, she thought, be near the time for Mrs. Barr to return; but the vague dread she felt at being shut up in the abandoned house with those unknown and mysterious companions was so great that she felt she would run some risk rather than endure the strain much longer.

And then she heard again a creaking on the stairs, so unmistakably that of the heavier foot that she knew it must be the man from the kitchen coming up the stairs to the very top.

There he stopped, and she could hear his heavy breath-

ing, and knew that he was listening.

But not a sound disturbed the silence; and, without going far enough along the landing to see that the window had been broken and that there was a ladder outside, the man went downstairs, apparently satisfied that he was alone in the house; for instead of going down on tiptoe, as he had come up, she heard his foot fall heavily and solidly on step after step.

Nellie's perplexity grew greater than ever. There was something in this slow, ponderous gait now that the unseen man was walking in his natural manner, which made her think he could not be the lunatic she had supposed. One instinctively connects the idea of madness with rapid and wild locomotion, flighty words, uncouth cries—with everything, in fact, that was not suggested by this cautious and slow-moving person.

He went downstairs, crossed the hall, and again shut himself into the kitchen.

No sooner had the door been heard to close than another door, one on the upper floor this time, opened quickly, and the lighter more rapid footsteps of the second intruder went quickly along the corridor, past her room, and to the staircase.

There was silence again, and then again there was the sound of a fall of bricks and plaster in the kitchen.

Immediately afterwards she knew, by the fact that the sound became suddenly much louder, that the kitchen-door had been opened. She unlocked her own door, so that she might be ready, at the first propitious turn of affairs, to make her escape.

She could hear better now. The rush of falling bricks and dust continued, and soon she was able to distinguish, by certain very slight sounds in the hall below, that it was



73

some one on this, the outer side of the door, who had opened it, and who was watching, from the obscurity which enshrouded that part of the house, the doings in the lighted kitchen.

She ventured out and peeped over the edge of the landing. By the faint light that was evidently coming through the crack of the partly opened door, she could just make out that there was a figure waiting in the corner of the hall close by the open door.

She dared not go down or crarte her neck far enough to make out more; but on her hands and knees she waited, in a most painful state of tension, to learn what was going forward.

Suddenly she saw the man fall back; at the same moment the light grew brighter, and she knew that the kitchen door had been flung wide, though the dim light of one candle, which was all the illumination, did not suffice to show her more than the fact that there were now two figures instead of one in the hall below.

With a cry the man whose voice she had heard, the one who had got in by the window, avoided the onrush of the other man, and got into a dark corner where he was totally hidden from her view.

Again there was a moment's dead silence. Then the other man, slower, heavier, bulkier than his opponent, and always strangely silent, turned as if in search of some weapon.

The other man, evidently, as it seemed to Nellie, the younger, was upon him at once like a wild animal, tearing and beating, and uttering the while cries and exclamations of rage.

They rolled over together on the floor, the one silent, the other still uttering strange cries. Then one of them, the heavier, managed to get upon his feet, and darting back into the kitchen, slammed the door with a noise that echoed from end to end of the house.

The next moment it was burst open, but the light on the other side had been extinguished, and in the darkness Nellie heard a terrible scuffle, in which furniture was overturned, missiles were hurled from end to end of the room, and finally, there was such a crash of glass and clatter of wooden boards that she guessed they must have forced something heavy, such as an iron bar, right through one of the barred and shuttered windows.

And all the while she could hear the one voice—only the one.

At first she had been fascinated, struck motionless, by the noise and commotion of the struggle. Recovering her wits a little, she got upon her feet, and was about to avail herself of the opportunity of escaping by the way she had come, when there reached her alert ears certain words so strange, so suggestive, that she remained rooted to the spot, wondering if she heard aright.

It was the same voice, always the same voice, speaking, and always without reply. Evidently the speaker had got the heavier man down, and was pouring into his ears an harangue full of venom, full of rage.

"Ah, you old knave, you old rascal, so I've caught you at your games, have I? You've been having a nice little hunt all by yourself, haven't you? A very nice little quiet thoroughgoing search, in and out of the house and all round the house, eh? Lie still, or I'll give you something to keep you quiet."

For a moment he was silent, and the scuffle went on again; then he resumed his speech, breathing more heavily, as if he had suffered a little in the struggle.

"Hope you've been enjoying yourself, my friend, at this pleasant work! Not a very successful piece of business though, was it, that has taken you all this time, and that you haven't succeeded in accomplishing yet? I'm afraid you don't go the right way about it, my friend! Not neat-handed enough, perhaps! We want something more



/3

than the wish to get rich at other folks' expense to show us how to find diamonds!"

Diamonds! Nellie felt a cold shiver pass through her. What was this about diamonds? She hated the word.

"Now keep quiet, do. For I've not done with you yet. You're a thief, my friend, no better than a thief, and if we can't make thieves pay in one way, we've got to make them pay in another. No, don't struggle. I've got the upper hand of you, and I mean to keep it. I'm going to play the knave with you, my friend, but I'm going to do it ever so much better than you. For while you must needs pull a house to pieces to hunt for a diamond that you haven't the wit to find, I'm going to hunt for something I know how to lay my hands on. See?"

There was another short scuffle, both men plunging and tearing at each other, rolling against the wall, breathing heavily and gripping each other with a deadly grip.

Then she heard the younger man say, between his set teeth—

"Let go, you---"

There was a sound in his voice that brought a feeling to her throat as if she herself had been clutched with a murderous hand.

There was a horrible, sickening sound, and she knew that blow after blow was being struck by one man at the other with something heavy and hard.

She tried to call out, but her voice, though it did succeed in uttering a sound, was weak and powerless.

Then she heard a groan, and there was silence.

The scuffle, after being carried on in the hall and all round the kitchen, had ended as it began, close to the kitchen-door.

Nellie, who thought that murder had been committed below in the darkness, staggered and tried to reach the window, that she might fetch help and give the alarm.

But she had to hold by the banisters for a moment to

recover herself; for she was so giddy and sick with terror that she could scarcely stand. While she stood thus, she heard the unmistakable chink of gold, and then the crisp rustle of banknotes, and she knew that the murderer, or would-be murderer, was robbing the body.

She crouched in horror, as she heard him walk away, letting, in his haste, one or two gold pieces roll on the marble floor of the hall. Was he coming upstairs? She felt that, if he did so, he would murder her too, and that she had not so much as strength left to her to utter a cry.

But he retreated into the kitchen, and she, recovering a shred of her lost self-possession, staggered away to the window on the landing, and getting out upon the ladder with feet so unsteady that she was in danger of kicking it away rather than of using it, she reached the ground in safety and ran for her life towards the lodge.

Not fear, not girlish terror of violence and bloodshed was it alone which made her limbs tremble and her heart grow sick as she stumbled along the drive and scrambled through the overgrown bushes.

In a flash of illumination the meaning of the ghastly incident had come to her, revealed by the savage words of the man who had spoken to the man who had held his tongue.

These men, whoever they were, were knaves, rascals, creatures who, vile themselves, looked upon all other men as vile too. They believed, firmly believed, that her father, her poor, innocent father who had been suffering for seven years for the crime of some unknown thief, was a thief himself, and that the Countess's diamond, the splendid jewel which was worth a fortune and which had so miraculously disappeared since the day when Alaric Smith was robbed at the railway-station, was hidden somewhere in the house which, by Alaric Smith's order, had remained shut up and abandoned for these seven long years!



77

This was the explanation of the havoc that had been wrought in the house; this, without a doubt, was why pieces had been hacked out of every article of furniture which stupid avarice and dishonesty could imagine to be a possible hiding-place for the treasure.

Nellie could have laughed with scorn at the mad notion, if she had not been filled, on the one hand with indignation at these suspicions of her poor father, and on the other with

horror at what had just taken place.

Not for one moment did the trusting girl believe her father guilty, either of the initial theft, or of the deliberate crime of concealing the most precious portion of the plunder. All through these years she had cherished the memory of the face that always grew tender and gentle when it was turned upon her, of the dark eyes which had always been soft and kind when they met hers.

Foolish, careless, rash, he might have been, he must have been. But no silly stories concocted by clever counsel on the prosecuting side, and affirming that he had disguised himself in a fur coat which had never been found or in a grey moustache which nobody could produce, would suffice to convince the loving daughter that her father was anything but the most ill used as he was the best of men.

But the very suggestion made by the one thief and evidently entertained by the other, was disquieting for all that.

Without believing it, she was uneasy—distressed at the very thought. And again there came into her mind the perplexing question: Why had her father given this strange order, that the house was to be shut up?

She stumbled along the drive to the lodge, and knocked at the door. It was by this time quite dark, and Mrs. Barr came out with profuse apologies on the tip of her tongue.

"There now, to be sure, miss, I knew as how you'd be wondering why I didn't come! But my old man, he—"

She stopped short, for Nellie had gripped her arm, and

was trying to get back her voice to speak.

"Mrs. Barr," she sobbed out at last, "something's happened at the house—something dreadful. Murder, I think!"

The old woman uttered a subdued scream.

"Murder! Oh, Miss Nellie!"

"Hush! Two men—two thieves—have had a fight there, down in the hall and kitchen. It was dreadful. Come with me quickly, and as we go, I'll tell you all about it. Yes, yes, you must come!"

Mrs. Barr had already shown signs of unwillingness to

go on this gruesome errand; but the girl insisted.

"Listen!" she said. "One of the men robbed the other, and got away, I think. Indeed, I'm almost sure that he did. But the other, the one he attacked, lay quite, quite still, and I'm afraid he's dead. You mustn't wait for any one else. You know they dare not hurt us when there are two of us. And when there is only one man to meet, if indeed he's alive. Come, come!"

She panted out the words incoherently, clutching Mrs. Barr by the arm and drawing her towards the door. Most unwillingly the old woman suffered herself to be led back along the drive by the young one, protesting that they ought to call up some neighbours from the village, or to go to the police-station in the first place.

Nellie knew better.

"If there's a chance of saving the man's life," she said, "we ought to go at once. And besides, I want to find out, I want to know."

"What, miss?"

"Who he is. He was in the house when I got there, I think. I heard him hammering away in the kitchen."

"Hammering!"

"Yes, Mrs. Barr; have you ever heard any noises in the house during these seven years?"



79

"Noises! I—I don't know as I have, Miss Nellie," faltered Mrs. Barr, who was thoroughly alarmed and scarcely able to speak steadily.

"Because something wrong has been going on there for

a long time."

"Wrong! Oh, Miss Nellie!"

"And I don't believe Mr. Bridger has ever been near the place, or if he has, he hasn't taken any pains to see that things were all right. For all the furniture's been pulled about and hacked to pieces, and the books have been torn out of their shelves."

"What!"

"Yes, yes, I tell you. Don't stop! There's nothing for you to be frightened about. Remember that I was in the house—with two of the thieves—for an hour and more."

Mrs. Barr uttered a little cry, but the girl insisted on dragging her onward.

"Oh, Miss Nellie, what can we do against a band of

thieves? Let us call the policeman first."

"I tell you there's no band of thieves!" said Nellie, impatiently. "There are only two of them, and they were strangers to each other, I think. At any rate, I don't believe they were part of a gang. The one was robbing the place, and the other came to rob him!"

Mrs. Barr, however, would not be comforted. To be thus roused out of her peaceful humdrum life by a tragedy was more than her sixty years could bear with equanimity.

"To think of it, miss!" whimpered she. "The house ransacked, and everything ruined, you say! And your poor father so proud of it, and so confident as he was, ay, even to the very end, as he'd come back there and live with you like the best in the land. It do break one's heart to think of it, that it do."

"Make haste, make haste, or we may find that the

man's bled to death!" urged Nellie.

But Mrs. Barr was more philosophical.

"And serve him right if he was to, miss!" she said with conviction. "I don't 'old with keeping them sort alive, not one minute longer than can be helped! What's the good of 'em? What's the good of being so tender-'earted to a lot of pests as we could all of us do without? No. My mercy is for them that's merciful, and my kindness is for them as are kind to me. None of your quaker turning of the other cheek when I've been smitten on the first!"

"Oh, Mrs. Barr, but that's not Christian!" protested Nellie, as they reached the gravelled space before the house, and went towards the servants' quarters.

"Well, miss, everything can be carried too far," said Mrs. Barr, "and my Christianity don't carry me so far as that. Look, there's a light in the house still!"

And she stopped, and pointed to a feeble flicker that could be seen through the smashed shutter of one of the windows.

Nellie stopped too.

Certainly there had been no light in the house when she left it. Mrs. Barr tried to get away; the poor woman was thoroughly frightened. But with Nellie, curiosity overcame every other feeling. Inch by inch she dragged the old woman forward, until they reached the back door.

It was ajar.

"Come!" whispered she. "It's open; we can always get away if we want to."

She took care not to let her companion know the fears which the presence of the light roused in her. There was certainly some one in the house besides the dead man!

She pulled Mrs. Barr inside the doorway and along the flagged passage to the hall, which they entered by a door which they found shut but not locked.

"Here," she whispered, "just here was where he was lying."



81

But on the spot where the motionless body of the fallen man had lain, there was nothing but a red stain. Through the open door of the kitchen came just enough light for them to see it. And, without uttering a sound, they clung to each other, shuddering.

At the same moment, Nellie was startled to hear the old sound, the rush of bricks and mortar on to the kitchen floor.

Still clinging to Mrs. Barr, she took a couple of steps forward, and peeped into the room. Tearing at the loose bricks which lined the chimney with torn and bleeding hands, the blood still trickling from a wound in his head, a stout, grey-haired man was working with the wild energy of a madman. Nellie stared at the figure in blank bewilderment. Mrs. Barr, more bewildered still, uttered a sort of gasp, and stepping forward into the room, came close up to the hearth, where the kitchen-range had been wrenched out of its place, and the brickwork of the chimney was being torn away in its turn.

Leaning forward against the edge of the overturned deal table, she stared at the stout, grey-haired man, and panted out two words—

"Mr.—Bridger!"



CHAPTER VIII

JORL BRIDGER'S first instinct, on finding himself discovered in his dubious occupation of hacking out the bricks in the kitchen chimney of his late partner, was to run away. He threw down the chisel which he had in his right hand, and made for the nearest door. But it was one which led into the scullery, and it was locked.

By this time, too, Mrs. Barr, though still much alarmed, was recovering herself a little, and Nellie, though she was sick with vague dread, stood her ground and stared at him with an intensity which made it hopeless to suppose that she had any more doubt than her companion of his identity.

So he pretended to recognize Mrs. Barr for the first time, and tried to laugh as she came forward and looked him full in the face.

"Oh, Mrs. Barr, it's you, is it? And—and who's this?"

Both Nellie and Mrs. Barr were looking in horror at the wounds on his head and hands. Neither could speak for a moment, so shocking was the sight, so extraordinary was the enthusiasm with which, though in a pitiable state of exhaustion, he had been engaged on his work of destruction.

Before either could answer, however, Mr. Bridger, who was past middle age, and whose eyesight was not so good as it had been, suddenly recognized Nellie, and staggered back with an exclamation of dismay.

"You-Nellie Smith!"



83

"Yes," said she. "I came here this afternoon to see the house-"

His evident consternation cut her short.

"Why—why didn't you come to me, to the office?" he asked angrily.

"I did. But you were away. So I came here by

myself. I had a right to come."

Girl as she was, there was a note of staunch determination, almost of defiance in her voice, she showed him she was not in the mood to submit to be bullied.

"Of course you had. But——" He stopped, looked at her askance, and hesitated.

Mrs. Barr took the opportunity of speaking.

"Let me bathe your 'ead and 'ands, Mr. Bridger, first thing," she said promptly. "I'll just go and get some water from the pump in the yard while you're settling things up."

She searched among the confusion and dust, for a can or jug, and having found what she wanted, left the two face to face.

Then the girl spoke out-

"What have you been doing here all these years that the house has been shut up, Mr. Bridger? Why are the books turned out of the cases, the furniture hacked about? And what are you doing with the brickwork of the chimney?"

"That's my affair," he said sullenly. "You don't

suppose I was doing anything wrong, do you?"

"Oh yes, I do," said she with spirit. "It seems to me very wrong indeed to have tried to make me marry your son, and then to have refused to pay my school-fees, for one thing. And it seems to me that to make havoc of this house while you are in charge of it, is another wrong thing. My father was proud of this house, and wanted it kept just as it was, just as it was. But you have made it a wreck!"

84

Joel Bridger was too much confounded by this passionate accusation to be able to answer immediately.

Recovering himself a little, he turned upon her abruptly.

"You say you found the books turned out of their cases! When—when did you learn this?"

"When I first came here this afternoon—before the other man got in."

If Mr. Bridger had been startled before, he was more startled now. He stared at the girl in consternation.

"The—the other man! What other man?" faltered he, huskily.

"The man who fought with you, who accused you of trying to find diamonds—"

"Hush, hush!" said Mr. Bridger, looking round him fearfully.

But Mrs. Barr was still at work at the squeaking pump outside in the yard, and these two were alone.

"The man who knocked you down, and robbed you, and left you lying on the floor," ended Nellie.

Mr. Bridger came slowly nearer to her, and when he was so close that he could whisper, he said, under his breath—

"Who was the man? Do you know?"

Nellie stared at him mistrustfully.

"Don't you know?" said she.

He shook his head.

"I can only suppose," said he, "that he is the man who is responsible for the state the house is in. You know yourself the wreck that has been made of it. Faithful to my promise to your father, I've been trying to repair the damage myself; but I'm but a clumsy amateur, and, as you see, I'm making a fearful mess of it."

He pointed to the bricks and plaster which he had pulled out of the chimney. Nellie, however, looked incredulous. She remembered a good deal of what the other man had said to Joel Bridger, and it had given

8 ح

her the impression that he was visiting the house for the first time.

"Well," she said dryly, "the police will have to find him for us. I'm going straight to the police-station at Bath as soon as I get back."

"You'd better leave that to me," said he, quietly.
"After all, it's my business, not yours. I have been robbed.
The fellow's taken my watch and chain, and a considerable sum of money."

"Yes, I know. I was on the landing, and I heard the

rattle of money."

Again he looked at her with a close scrutiny. He would have given the world to know just what she knew and just what she thought.

"Look here," he said at last, in a persuasive tone, "I don't think I should complain to the police, if I were you. There are reasons—are there not?—why it's better to avoid their interference if possible."

Reddening with shame, Nellie bowed her head in acquiescence.

"As for the damage done to the house, I give you my word I'll see that it's repaired as quickly as possible. It looks worse than it is, I think, except here, where the fellow must have forced the range right out of its place, in wilful mischief."

Nellie did not trust herself to any more decided opinion than was expressed by a nod; and as Mrs. Barr came in at that moment with a jug of water, the next half-hour was spent in finding the wherewithal to bandage Mr. Bridger's wounds, and in making him as comfortable as the circumstances would permit.

He wanted Nellie to come back with him to Bath, having, so he said, ordered a fly at the inn in the village to drive him back.

But this she steadfastly refused to do. Mrs. Barr would put her up for the night, she said, and in the mean time she would get Barr himself to do such temporary external repairs to the house as would make it fairly secure against any further attempts to get in.

So Mr. Bridger, reluctantly enough, was forced to leave the premises with the two women. But he refused to leave for Bath until Mrs. Barr had brought her husband to board up the window on the landing and the broken shutter on the ground floor in his actual presence. And before he drove away in his fly he administered a caution to Nellie against letting the Barrs know more than could be helped about what she had seen.

"For," said he, as a parting shot, "if any wild rumours are set about now to revive the old story, your poor father will find it impossible to fulfil the wish of his heart, and to live in his own house again when he comes back."

Nellie saw the force of this argument, and though she could not avoid a chat over the startling incidents of the afternoon with the Barrs, she thought it better to give Mr. Bridger's own explanation for what it was worth, and to let it be thought that the man who had robbed and injured him had also done the damage to the house, and that Mr. Bridger undertook the responsibility of acquainting the police with the details of the outrage.

Whether this explanation satisfied the good people or not, it was inevitable that rumours of the strange occurrence should get abroad in the neighbourhood. And on the following day, when Nellie and Mrs. Barr's grown-up son were mounting guard, to keep off a few idlers who had been bold enough to scale the outer wall, word was brought to the girl that Lady Alicia Cannington was waiting at the gates, and wanted to speak to her.

Cannington! The name startled Nellie, who knew that the lady must be some relation of Lord Alford's. She hurried down the drive, and found outside the rusty gates an old-fashioned family carriage with the Cannington arms



painted on the panels, and a little smiling old lady looking out of the window.

87

"Ah! Is this Miss Smith?" she asked, with a gracious bend of the head, putting out a small hand in a soiled suede glove, and a little wrist loaded with slender gold bangles, from which dangled ever so many little mementoes and charms. "How do you do, my dear? I've heard dreadful things about the adventures you went through here yesterday, and as, though I don't know you, I'm very much interested in you, I thought I'd drive over and find out whether you had suffered much from your fright!"

The voluble little lady paused to take breath, and, still holding Nellie's reluctant hand firmly in her own, looked into her face with almost an affectionate interest.

Nellie grew white and red alternately. This meeting with a second member of the family with which hers had had such a fatal connection, shocked, perplexed, alarmed her.

"It was very kind of you," muttered she in a low voice, and with much shyness. "I was frightened at the time, but—but I've got over it now."

"Tell me all about it, my dear. Will you get in and come for a drive with me? By an extraordinary coincidence, this news of your adventure came to my ears this morning just after I had received a letter from my nephew, Lord Alford, telling me all about your slipping into the water at Bay View, and about his fishing you out. He told me what a nice little girl you were, and interested me so much in you that, when I heard the other news, I made up my mind to come over at once, and make your acquaintance."

"How very, very kind!"

It was all Nelly could say. She was bewildered; while grateful on the one hand, she was puzzled on the other. For under all Lady Alicia's effusiveness of manner there was a certain hard curiosity, which made the girl suspect

that there was more than mere good nature in this ex-

pedition.

Against her will she was forced to get into the carriage, and the two fat horses went waddling down the road with it, while the girl found herself catechised at great length and so shrewdly that she could not help thinking, when Lady Alicia's curiosity was satisfied, that she had admitted more than was altogether desirable.

The little old lady sat back in silence for a few minutes when she had learnt all she could. Presently she looked

keenly at Nellie, still smiling, and said-

"You will excuse my touching on a delicate subject, my dear, but I always had my doubts about the justice of the sentence on your father." Her voice dropped to a discreet whisper on the last words.

Nellie burst into tears.

"Oh, it is good of you to say that! It's the first time anybody has ever said it to me! And it's true. Oh, I know it's true. He never took them, never! If you'd known him, you would have laughed at the idea that he could! He was goodness itself!"

"There, there, my dear, don't cry," said the little old lady, briskly. "What's done can't be undone, and neither you nor I must blame anybody. Circumstances were

against him, that's all."

"Oh, I know, I know. And he was to blame, of course, in a way. He ought never to have let them go out of his hands, no, not for a single second. Only it's hard, hard, that he should have to suffer so much for just a moment's carelessness."

"It is, my dear, it's very hard. Especially as Jack, my nephew, and Mr. Cannington, my brother-in-law, were just as much to blame. But they've suffered too, you know, especially poor Jack! It was a great loss, a great loss. For he's frightfully extravagant, and jewels of that value are something to fall back upon, you know."

89

Nellie was bewildered by this frankness, this display of confidence. There was a mixture of authority and kindness in the manner of Lady Alicia which impressed her strongly, at the same time that it made her feel like a child.

"And do you know," she burst out impulsively, "that there are people mean and wicked enough to suggest that he —my father—knew where the great diamond, the Countess's diamond, was all the time, and that he wouldn't tell!"

"I know. That was why he got such a long sentence. It was said it would have been less than half if he had helped them to recover the jewels that had disappeared."

"You don't believe that, do you?"

"Of course not, my dear. People don't suffer fourteen years' imprisonment when they could get off with four! And now, what are you going to do with yourself till your father comes back?"

"Oh, I'm not quite sure yet. But I'm going up to London to try to get employment either in teaching music or as as accompanist."

"You're not going to live in your father's house, then?"

"Oh no. His directions were that it should be kept shut up. Of course, he knew that I should have no one to live with there."

"I see. It would be lonely."

"It would be impossible," said Nellie, with a shudder.

"Well, my dear, I have a proposal to make to you. Supposing you come and stay at Heynes Hall? I'm there permanently myself, now Lady Alford's practically left her husband, and though the place is more than lively enough when my nephew is there with his bands of heterogeneous friends, at others, when he's away on his yacht, or in town, it's very lonely for me indeed."

Nellie felt that her breath was taken away by the offer.

"Oh, Lady Alicia, I don't know what—what to say!" she almost sobbed.

The old lady patted her arm kindly.

- "There, there, child, it will be just as good for me as for you. You needn't say who you are, you know, so as to avoid gossip which might tease you. Smith is not a name that will attract attention, and after all, if it were known whose daughter you are, people would only begin to wonder whether the sentence wasn't unjust."
 - "How good you are-both of you!"

"You'll come, then?"

- "Oh yes, yes. But what can I do for you? I'm very ignorant, and as for my playing, you must have heard a great deal that's better than mine!"
- "That remains to be seen. Now, what do you say to coming back with me straightway? Your trunks are on the Gaiety Girl, I understand."

Nellie looked surprised. And Lady Alicia laughed.

"Oh, my nephew tells me everything. I'm a very indulgent aunt, and we adore each other. Come now, do you agree to going back with me at once?"

Nellie hesitated.

"I could come back, couldn't I, just to see that the house was all right?" she said.

"Of course, of course. Heynes Hall is not more than six miles away."

It was all done so quickly, Nellie being her own mistress and wholly unencumbered with luggage, that a little later she found herself driving with Lady Alicia through a stately park rather bare of trees, in the midst of which stood, on slightly rising ground, the most beautiful mansion the girl had ever beheld.

Heynes Hall, which dated from Elizabeth's reign, was built of stone of a rich brown colour, in the favourite E-shape; and its many-windowed front, topped by a graceful palisade and by handsome and quaint gables; the statues let into niches on the upper story; the terrace adorned with tall shrubs; and the handsome portico flanked by two stately



91

and curious lamps, — formed a spectacle which made Nellie turn to her companion and say half joyfully, half shyly—

"Oh, Lady Alicia, I'm sure I shall be happy in that

beautiful house!"

But if the outside had been imposing, Nellie found the interior almost too splendid, too spacious for her simple tastes. There seemed to be such miles of wide-carpeted corridor to traverse before you got, as she expressed it, "from anywhere to anywhere else." And when she was taken to the east wing and ushered into a little suite of three rooms on the second story, which she was told she could have all to herself, she felt rather oppressed than pleased at her unexpected grandeur.

And a new terror had struck her. How was she to dress in accordance with her new surroundings? It was true that Lady Alicia was by no means smart, that her bonnet was insignificant, her gloves soiled, her mantle dowdy. But then, she was Lady Alicia, and Nellie had no rank to sustain her.

The matter was growing quite serious when Nellie heard a little tap at her door, and on saying "Come in," she was surprised to see Lady Alicia with her bonnet off, walking with a little ebony, crutch-handled cane, and followed by a maid carrying a large box, shaped like a casket. Nellie was irresistibly reminded of the visits of the old fairy to the princess imprisoned in the tower in many a fantastic tale.

"Here, my dear," said she, "I've brought you some odds and ends to smarten yourself up with. Lord Alford will be here to-night, I expect, and you have nothing to wear till your trunks can be unpacked."

"And not much to wear then !" thought Nellie.

"So if you find anything you like among these things, pray use it just as if it were your own. And Jeanne is very clever; we'll send for some stuff in a day or two, and she'll

make you a smart dinner-dress so that you can hold your own with the stage folk."

Nellie was grateful, surprised, puzzled. Lady Alicia spoke of her nephew's friends with unspeakable disdain, yet she was ready to receive them all, as well as ready to make a companion of the daughter of the man who was at least supposed to have robbed the family to an unprecedented extent.

She must be a singularly large-minded woman, this tiny old lady with the wrinkles, the courteous smiles, and the ebony cane!

The girl thanked her, took the box, and Lady Alicia went to the door. There she stopped, however, to look back and say in a lower voice—

"Oh, my dear, I must give you one word of warning. If Persis, that's Lady Alford, my nephew's wife, should come in upon you one day, and insult you, and threaten to make you co-respondent in a divorce suit, you are not to mind. It's only her way. She does it with everybody, but especially with those few ladies who come here who are not fast."

And with another smile, Lady Alicia disappeared, leaving Nellie in a state of the utmost consternation and low spirits.

If this was what she had to expect, she would certainly not stay. And then she sat down with a sinking feeling at her heart, and an uncomfortable sensation that the wicked fairy had left her curse, in the conventional manner, at the bottom of the casket.

This impression deepened as the day wore on. They had luncheon together in a room which seemed much too large for the small table and the two ladies. Nellie was shown over huge apartments, including a magnificent gallery in which an occasional human figure looked as insignificant as a fly. Then she played to Lady Alicia, and was much applauded, and then she walked in the grounds, and felt as lonely as a hermit.



93

And then, to her great joy, when she got upstairs to her own rooms again, she saw a procession of cabs and carriages coming up the park, and knew that it was Lord Alford and "the ballet-girls," as Miss Baldock called them.

The young Earl's cheery voice sent a comforting thrill through her heart when he presently sent up a message that he would like to speak to her in the gallery, and she, entering by the door at one end, found herself greeted by him with a stare of intense surprise.

"When my aunt told me that she'd brought you here, Nellie," he began, seizing both her hands and looking at her with grotesquely wide-open eyes, "I thought I must be dreaming!"

"I—I hope you don't mind!" faltered the girl,

nervously.

"Well, I do and I don't, if you can understand. I'm delighted to see your demure little face again; for though we began badly, you and I were great pals before you left the yacht, weren't we?"

"Yes," gasped she.

"Yet on the other hand I should dearly love to know, what the old lady's up to!"

"Up to?"

He nodded.

- "Why, it was her kindness of heart that-"
- "Oh, no, it wasn't. I know Aunt Alicia, and she—well, she never wastes her kindness of heart! She's got the brain of a field-marshal, has Aunt Alicia, and every move she makes means something. How I should like to know what this means."

"Perhaps," said Nellie, nervously, remembering certain ominous words of her hostess, "I'd better go. Perhaps Lady Alford wouldn't like my being here."

"Do you mean my wife?" said he, sharply, his tone suddenly losing its good humour. "Oh, you needn't worry your head about her. All she ever wants is that I should be

uncomfortable, as uncomfortable as possible. So as long as she feels sure that I'm up to my eyes in debt and can scarcely move for duns, she won't trouble herself either about me, or my aunt, or our guests and friends."

He spoke so bitterly that Nellie was filled with sudden compassion, and felt a choking sensation in her throat. Those debts, those duns! Were they not all her father's

fault? She had trouble in suppressing a sob.

Lord Alford, who had been walking up and down between the door near where she stood and one of the windows, suddenly caught sight of her sorrowful face, and his own changed at once. His usual look of boyish good humour appeared again on it, as he said gently—

"Now, it's too bad of me to tease you like that with my cares and my difficulties, when you, poor child, have your own too, haven't you?"

She drew a long breath.

"What troubles me," she said in a husky voice, "is that, if only—if only you had had those jewels, you wouldn't have been—been in difficulties at all!"

And she broke down into an irrepressible sob. With impulsive kindness the Earl patted her shoulder, scolded her, laughed at her, told her that he hadn't the least idea she was so silly, so awfully, childishly silly.

"Why, my dear child, if I'd had those jewels left with me, they'd have disappeared long ago, ages ago! Don't worry your little heart about that. If you do, it only shows that you haven't any knowledge of character. For I'm warranted to make soup of the finest property that ever existed in half the time it would take any other fool to get rid of it. There!"

She suddenly looked up.

"I do understand your character though," she said warmly. "I understand that you're one of the most generous, absurdly generous and open-hearted creatures that ever lived, and that if your wife is really no nicer



95

to you than you say, she—she ought to be ashamed of herself!"

She poured out her words with the frank impulsiveness of a schoolgirl, but they had an extraordinary effect upon the young man. Instead of laughing at her again, or mocking her again, he looked at her with quite a new expression of gravity touching in the extreme.

"Little Nellie," said he, gently, "you mustn't say those things, and you mustn't think them, because they aren't true. But—well, it does one good to hear such a pretty, hearty little speech, for real feeling's about as rare in these parts as—real cash."

He suddenly changed his tone on the last words, glancing at the door. For they heard footsteps coming towards the gallery.

As he turned his head, a voice called out-

"Lord Alford, where are you? I've found the cards."

As the Earl made a step towards the door, Nellie sprang up from the seat into which she had dropped, with her eyes wide open, her face perfectly white.

For the voice was that of the man who had got into her father's house and robbed Mr. Bridger.

CHAPTER IX

THE next moment the door of the gallery was pushed open and the owner of the voice came in.

If Nellie had been shocked and surprised a minute ago, on recognizing in the voice of this guest of Lord Alford's that of the man who had robbed Mr. Bridger, she was more amazed now.

For the new-comer was no other than the man who had haunted her, and vainly tried to speak with her—the young man in the shabby grey suit.

But he was not shabby now. On the contrary, the clothes he wore were if anything aggressively new and smart. Although Nellie at once surmised that he must have bought them ready-made at Bath, either that very morning or the night before, he was one of those men who can look well-dressed without difficulty. Tall, slight, fairly good-looking and obviously a gentleman, according to the loose use of the term, he was as easy in his brand-new suit of dark blue serge as if it had been cut by a West End tailor, and though Nellie knew him to be a thief, and half believed him to have been as ready to murder Joel Bridger as he had been to rob him, she found it almost impossible, as she looked at him, to realize the fact.

"Ah! They told me you were in the gallery, and so I peered and pried, and rambled through drawing-rooms and rushed through corridors, until Fate brought me here!"

Lord Alford laughed, took from him the packs of cards he had found, and turned to Nellie.



97

He could not fail to see by the look on the girl's face that she was suffering from some great shock. And the absence of any other possible cause made him at once come to the conclusion that she knew his latest guest.

For a moment there was an awkward silence. Nellie was glancing up, glancing down, with certain decisive and momentous words very near her lips. The new-comer's face had changed, and the merry smile of triumph on his face has given place to an anxious quiver of the lips and look of the eyes. The Earl saw that something was wrong, and looked at the young man, and then again at Nellie.

"You know Mr. Moon?"

She hesitated.

A denunciation trembled upon her lips. She could not let this man be accepted, unchallenged, even in the easy-going society which the Earl chose to gather round himself. At least he must know, if only in veiled terms, when and where she had heard, if not seen him.

Lord Alford was turning towards her, looking at her curiously.

In a tremulous voice, and slowly, she began—

" N-o-o, but--"

As she spoke she looked up, straight at the dubious

stranger.

And she saw that his right hand was against his breast, and that between his fingers he held a letter. Although she could not, of course, make out either the address or the handwriting, she knew, connecting the movement with the gesture she had seen him use on a previous occasion, that the letter was for her, and that it was from her father.

She stopped short, drew a long breath, and said-

"I think I have met Mr. Moon somewhere, though I don't remember to have heard his name before."

The Earl turned towards the stranger. The letter had rapidly disappeared into his breast-pocket.

"You know Miss Smith?"

"I have not the pleasure. But I am delighted-"

And before she could decide upon her attitude towards him, Mr. Moon had stepped briskly forward, and taking her hand, shook it with great heartiness.

Poor Nellie was in a sort of dream. Who was this man? How had he got into her father's confidence? What means had he used to get into the Earl's house?

Luckily for her, Mr. Moon was far too ready-witted to allow her momentary agitation to awaken undesirable suspicions. He laughed and chattered, and mimicked the ladies downstairs with so much humour, that not only the Earl, but Nellie herself, was obliged to join in his merriment.

Then they all went downstairs, and Nellie, though she was now longing for an opportunity of speaking apart with Mr. Moon, found it impossible to do so.

For the Earl remained with them, and took them to the Rose Room, a beautiful apartment in the west wing, with windows on three sides, oak-panelled walls, and furnished with hangings and coverings in cretonne of a rich rose-pink ground with big roses in pale shades of yellow and cream colour.

Here Lady Alicia was sitting demurely by the little tea-table, looking sombre but rather sweet in dark grey. While the ladies who had been on the yacht lounged about the room, sat back among the cushions of the deep window-seat under the largest of the mullioned windows, and chattered and laughed as freely and as noisily as of old.

Nellie noticed that a hush of surprise fell upon them all when she entered, and she noticed also that shrewd little Lady Alicia smiled over her tea-cup, and then glanced up at her with much slyness in her eyes.

Nellie took a chair as far from the others as possible, in the hope that Mr. Moon would come to her and fulfil his mysterious errand. But instead, she found herself seized upon by Mollie Dawes, who looked brilliant in an elaborate tea-gown, which suggested that it had done duty on the



99

stage. She glanced angrily at Lord Alford, who was talking to Mrs. Long and Moon, and to Major Marshall, who was the only other man present.

"How that Val Vane runs after the Earl!" said Miss Dawes, with a toss of the head. "Disgusting, isn't it?"

"Val Vane!" echoed Nellie, rather stupidly.

"Yes, yes; Mrs. Long. Didn't you know her singing name was Val Vane?"

"Oh no, I didn't," said Nellie. "Then Long is her

real name, I suppose?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Perhaps it is, or was. Perhaps it was the name of one of her husbands. But I shouldn't advise you to ask her, for she's been married so many times I dare say she forgets."

"Oh!" said Nellie.

"She's supposed to be a widow now, you know, and she has an absurd idea that the Earl is in love with her. Isn't it delicious? Whatever people may say against him, I'm sure they can't pretend he doesn't know a pretty woman from a plain one!"

"But she's clever, isn't she?"

Miss Dawes shrugged her massive shoulders.

"Do you think it's clever to run after a man who would rather be left alone? I do think it's such bad form. Now, I'm always so careful, I never come here without Ma. Then, when Lady Alford turns up, as she's always sure to do if I come here, why, she can't say anything, you see."

"No, I suppose not," said Nellie, vaguely, wondering why she was chosen as the recipient of these confidences.

"Of course," went on Miss Dawes, "sensible girls, like you, Miss Smith, know better than to think Lord Alford's in love with them just because he's civil."

"Yes," said Nellie, simply.

And she was still wondering why Miss Dawes was so communicative when that lady suddenly jumped up, and finding Lord Alford for one moment by himself, pinned

100

him, as it were, into a corner, and began to converse with him in a low voice.

Scarcely had she done this when Mrs. Long-came straight across the room, and took the vacant chair next to Nellie.

"Well," she said, "and so you're installed here for good. Do you know, I thought you would be? I wasn't a bit surprised, and I was very pleased, to find you here. Lady Alicia's all very well, but the other women are horrid; it's nice to have some one to talk to, to mitigate those Cockney girls and that dreadful Mrs. Dawes! I'm always hoping she'll over-eat herself and die, but she never does. I suppose she knows that Mollie's reputation is of so fragile a quality that Ma couldn't well be spared!"

"I don't like Mrs. Dawes very much, certainly," said

"Of course not, dear. How could you? You'll like Lady Alford better, of course, because she's a lady, but she's dreadfully abrupt and slangy, and her jealousy's a perfect farce. She follows me about wherever I go, and looks daggers if Lord Alford looks at me!"

Why doesn't she stay here, if she's so jealous of her

husband?" asked Nellie, prosaically.

"Oh, it's only the jealousy that doesn't want him to marry anybody else. She doesn't care for him a bit," explained Mrs. Long, screwing up her little eyes in delight at the joke.

"But how can he marry anybody else while she's his

wife?" said Nellie, blankly.

Mrs. Long burst into a rippling laugh, in which her

little eyes quite disappeared for the time.

"Oh, Miss Simple," cried she, "don't you know that they're the sort of people who never have the same wife or husband for long? They hate monotony above all things. And that, dear, is the most monotonous thing of all!"

Nellie was shocked, and all the more because she felt



101

that there was a substratum of truth in this indictment against the man who had been so good to her that she would fain have regarded him in the light of a hero. She looked rather blank, and Mrs. Long laughed again.

"Well, it makes life much more exciting," she said,

"and it gives us all a chance."

Nellie had some words on her lips, but she felt that they would sound ridiculously priggish and solemn in these frivolous ears, so she said nothing, and was glad when Mrs. Long, who was never in the same place for many minutes at a time, fluttered over to the other end of the room, to save her dogs from rough treatment at the hands of Major Marshall, to whose boots they had taken a fancy.

Then Lady Alicia gave her a glance of invitation, and Nellie, rather relieved at the change, crept into the low

chair beside the old lady.

"You look very solemn, Miss Smith," said she. "What have those two women been saying to you?"

"They've been telling me of Lady Alford's jealousy of them," said Nellie, after a moment's hesitation.

Lady Alicia shut her eyes with a look of disdain.

"Even Persis is not so silly as to be jealous of those creatures," said she. Then she opened her eyes, saw the girl's look of astonishment, and smiled. "Oh, don't look so much astonished, child, at my putting up with them as I do! When I married into the Cannington family I knew I should have to put up with a great deal, and I planned out my course, and have followed it ever since. I live here and look after things as well as I can; and my nephew brings here whom he pleases. My presence keeps some sort of decorum among these savage hordes, and I make myself as comfortable as I can while the house is full, and am quite comfortable when I have it to myself. If only things would last like that I should be perfectly satisfied. But they won't," she ended with an ominous shake of the head, as she again took up her knitting.

Lady Alicia was always making scrubby garments for the poor; and Nellie, who had picked up the wool several times for her and felt its quality, wondered whether the poor liked them.

The old lady's last words gave her something more serious to wonder about, and she was sitting back in her chair with a very sedate air, when she was startled to hear Lord Alford's voice close to her. He had dropped into a chair behind her, upon which, when she turned abruptly, she found him sitting astride, with his arms upon the back, and his head on his arms.

"I-I thought you were playing cards!" she said.

For the whole party had sat down at a table at the other end of the room, at the suggestion of Major Marshall, who was never happy without cards or a billiard cue in his hands.

Lord Alford nodded.

102

"So I was, but I soon had enough of it. They cleaned me out in about five minutes, and then I felt I had done my duty and could come with a clear conscience to have a chat with you. You interest me, Nellie; you are so absurdly grateful for nothing, when I find most people ungrateful for a good deal!"

She grew red and her eyes filled.

"Nothing!" said she, amazed. "Do you call it nothing to treat me as you've done, and as your aunt has done? To say the things you've both said to me—about—my father?"

Lord Alford frowned a little.

"What has she said to you about him?" he asked.

Lady Alicia had left her chair, and they were quite out of ear-shot of any one.

"She said she never did believe—the worst—of him," said Nellie.

He stared at her for a moment incredulously.

"Oh, she said that, did she?"

"Ye-es."



103

"Well, all right, never mind, don't look so miserable. I'm very glad she said that."

And Nellie understood that Lady Alicia's opinion had

previously been different, and strongly expressed.

"You'll find yourself rather uncomfortable in this crew, won't you?" he next asked abruptly.

She looked surprised again. He laughed.

"Oh, they're quite good enough for me. I like to be surrounded by people who are lively, even if they make a little unnecessary noise. And they do enjoy themselves, which is more than can be said of the crew my wife used to bring here, the racing and betting set of our own class."

Nellie, who saw that he invited freedom of speech, said

suddenly-

"But all your own class don't race and bet, do they?"

He laughed again.

"Of course not. But the others are dull, deadly dull. When the class I belong to—or the upper class, I suppose you'd call it—is respectable, its respectability is combined with a frigidity which would freeze the sun itself! There are some flagrant instances about here."

"But surely-"

"Listen. You don't understand. Things are at sixes and sevens here, though everything seems to look all right. My wife hates me—always did, I believe—and only comes when she wants a handle to get more money out of me."

"Oh no, I can't believe that."

"Ah, well, never mind. I don't ask you to believe it. What is of more consequence is that we're on the high-road to ruin here, and can't stop ourselves. All we can do is to keep on while we can, and to take it smiling when the crash comes! There, child, don't look so horrorstruck. Why should you mind hearing about it, if I don't mind facing it?"

"But it's horrible, horrible!" gasped the girl. "And to

think that I-we-"

She could not go on. Lord Alford looked at her in consternation. He had forgotten, great overgrown boy that he in some respects still was, that part of his difficulties were due to the action of her own father, and that, whether he had been guilty or not, her sensitive heart was only too painfully conscious of the fact.

"There, there, there. Silly girl! I didn't mean that! I was born to get into difficulties, as my father was before me. You'll make me afraid to speak to you, if you take

things so much to heart."

She made a great effort at self-control, and said-

"Remember how suddenly all these things have come upon me, and you'll forgive me, I know!"

"Why, you poor little creature, of course, I'd forgive you anything, if there were anything to forgive," said Lord

Alford, gently.

He had changed his position, and seated himself in the chair Lady Alicia had left vacant, and was speaking in a low voice full of kind feeling, when his aunt, who had left the room, glided quietly in again, and coming to Nellie, touched her on the shoulder, and with an excuse to her nephew, took the girl out with her.

Then she produced a letter from her pocket, and said—

"This is from Mr. Bridger, in answer to a note I sent him a couple of hours ago. I've told him you want the keys of The Firs, your father's house, and that you have a right to have them. And he says he's in a dreadful state, having been set upon by the thief, who knocked him down and robbed him yesterday in that house. But he'll come round to-night, after dinner, and speak to us about it."

Nellie did not immediately answer. Simple as she necessarily was, being only eighteen and just out of school, she was not deficient in shrewdness, and this extraordinary celerity of Lady Alicia's in obtaining the keys of The Firs seemed to point to only one conclusion. Lady Alicia believed, just as Mr. Bridger had done, and as the man called



105

Moon perhaps did, that the lost jewels, or some of them,

were hidden in the shut-up house.

The girl felt sick with anguish and mistrust. Lády Alicia, indeed, had a right to interest herself in the recovery of the jewels, an honest if not a disinterested right. But, coming so swiftly upon her belief that she herself had been offered a shelter out of pure philanthropy, the discovery of the wily old lady's real intentions gave Nellie a shock.

She bowed her head, but made no answer to the announcement of the approaching arrival of Mr. Bridger, whom she now looked upon as little better than a would-be criminal. But the next moment a new idea made her heart beat fast.

If Mr. Bridger came that evening he would meet Moon, the man who had first accused him of would-be theft, and then fought with him and robbed him. What would happen when these two came face to face?

Lady Alicia looked hard at her while these thoughts passed rapidly through the young girl's mind. She seemed to be trying to penetrate to her very heart.

"Well, child, I thought you wanted to have access to the house?" she said. "I thought you'd thank me for

sending for Mr. Bridger."

Nellie, far from grateful though she felt, mumbled out some hasty words of acknowledgment, which Lady Alicia received in silence which irritated her; and then, cut to the heart by the feeling that the old lady suspected not only her father but herself, of knowing where the jewels were, she turned away, glad of the excuse given by the gong which warned the guests to dress for dinner.

Nellie, who had availed herself of Lady Alicia's laces and ribbons to smarten up her simple "best" blouse of white silk, looked very girlish and pretty when she took her place at the table between Lady Alicia and Gustavus Moon.

She guessed that the young man himself had requested this arrangement, and again she wondered, as she noted

how undoubtedly well-bred he looked in evening dress, who he could be.

He did not leave her long without offering an explanation.

"This opportunity of talking to you, Miss Smith, has been the one strongest wish I have had for the last eight months at least," said he, as soon as the noisy conversation and laughter round the table gave him the chance he wanted.

She remembered that that was about the time since she saw him first hanging about her school in London. But she said nothing. He went on—

"When I first tried to find you out, I was in such low water that I was ashamed to call and ask boldly for you."

She remembered his shabby clothes, and bent her head in assent.

"So I waited and hung about, hoping for the chance that never came—till now."

His tone was full of emotion, and Nellie said nervously—

"But you haven't told me why you were so anxious to speak to me, Mr. Moon?"

"It was because I was entrusted with a message from your father, one of the best and noblest men that ever lived."

She caught her breath, unable to speak, and afraid of breaking into tears.

"Where—when did you know him?" whispered she, in a quavering voice.

"At Portland, where I was taking part of the duty of my father, who is chaplain there," he answered in a low voice. "I was attracted to your father from the first, partly by the look of suffering on his noble face, and partly also by the patience and gentleness which marked him out from the others, and which told me that he could not be as they were."

Touched to the quick, the girl was on the point of asking a question full of passion, of emotion, when suddenly there came into her mind, like a breath of icy air, the



107

remembrance of the scene at The Firs on the previous day; she was absolutely certain, though she had not seen this man then, that the voice was the same that she had heard haranguing Mr. Bridger. And the recollection of that scene, and of the part this man had played in it, gave her pause.

Quite composedly she asked—

"Was it through him you heard about me, then?"

"Yes. It was his only subject. 'My Nellie, my little Nellie.' Never anything else, morning, noon, and night, whenever I had a chance of speaking to him. I don't suppose he mentioned your name to any one else, but he looked upon me as his friend, and to me he opened his heart."

In spite of all she knew, Nellie found it hard to control herself. This man was playing upon her deepest feelings as upon an instrument of music, and her girlish face revealed the struggle within her.

"At last, when he heard that I was going away from my father, to take up a post as secretary to the head of our family, a well-known baronet, he begged me to carry a letter to you. I confess I tried to avoid this, as it is strictly against the prison regulations for any letter to go out without being read by the governor. But he prayed so hard, and I loved him so much, that he conquered my better judgment, and I—well, I brought the letter. I have it in my pocket now. I have carried it about with me all these months!"

"But why couldn't you have sent it me by post?" asked Nellie, almost sharply. "Surely that would have been simpler than waiting all this time."

She saw many points open to suspicion in this story, and had become suddenly inquisitive.

"Simply because I had promised to deliver it to you myself, with my own hand. And—well, if I must confess it, Miss Nellie, because, when once I had seen you, I longed

108

to know you, partly for your father's sake, and—partly for—your own."

He had a winning way, and a persuasive tongue. His blue eyes looked tender without impertinence, and Nellie, unwillingly, felt herself moved.

"And where is the letter now? Why don't you give it me?"

"Here? Before all these—animals? These jackdaws, these parrots?" asked he, hotly. "Would you risk it?"

"Well, let me have it directly after dinner."

He promised, and Nellie felt that the room was swimming round her, full of grinning faces, of discordant voices, until dessert was reached, and the long-looked-for signal was exchanged between Lady Alicia and somnolent Mrs. Dawes, who had to be prodded up to perceive it.

Then not even the gorgeous beauties of the Blue Saloon, which she now saw for the first time, could distract her attention from the eagerly expected moment when she should hold her father's letter in her own hands.

She prepared for the moment by taking a low chair in one of the deep, square windows, where, half-hidden by the long curtains of pale turquoise blue brocade, she could receive and read the letter unseen.

Her heart beat fast when the door opened, and Gustavus Moon, entering with the Major and Ned Ferrers, came straight to her, and put the letter into her hands.

She had had a doubt as to its genuineness until she took it, but that doubt was dispelled on the instant when she opened the letter, and found that her father addressed her by the nickname which, in his formal letters received through the prison authorities, he had never used.

"My darling Chubbir,

"Mr. Moon, who brings you this, is the only friend I have had since I left you. At last I can speak out to you, and I want you not to be frightened when you hear,



109

as I think you will, that I am going to be let out of prison to die. I am not dying, but I am making the prison authorities believe that I am. So keep a good heart, my child, I shall be with you soon. And we shall be rich, Chubbie, rich! No more poverty and struggle for either of us. No more hard work for poor pay. You shall have all you want, and more. Your poor father has not lived out these wretched years for nothing.

"Good-bye, my darling, and cheer up, wait, and hope.
"Your loving, longing,

"FATHER."

Nellie read this letter with eyes that seemed to burn the page. The opening, the change from the religious tone of resignation to which she was accustomed in his letters, startled and alarmed her. The hypocrisy which he alleged himself to be practising, sickened her. But that which took her by the throat and gnawed at her heart and dashed her poor little hopes to the ground with a violent hand, was the terrible knowledge, thus borne in upon her without possibility of mistake, that her adored father, the tender figure of her hopes and her dreams, was no innocent languishing for a crime he had not committed, but a thief and a rogue.

He would be rich, he said. How, unless he knew where to lay his hands on the Cannington jewels?

She sank down behind the curtain, cold and sick.

The world had turned upside down for her. Where could she bury her shame? What could she, should she do?

CHAPTER X

SHE was the daughter of a thief! That was what Nellie told herself in despair and dismay such as she had never known before. Not once in all these years had she doubted that her father was innocent, and the shock of this discovery stunned her.

Instead of cherishing the hope of meeting him once more, of reawakening his interest in life, of tending him with loving care till he had forgotten his wrongs, she now felt that the ground had been cut away from under her feet, and that she dreaded his return as much as she had longed for it.

But yet this shock, terrible as it was, did not affect her as the persecution of her schoolfellows, the taunts of Miss Baldock, had done. It was, perhaps, too overwhelming; it benumbed her faculties instead of stimulating them into agony.

She sat there alone behind the curtain, hearing the loud chatter of the women, the genial voice of old Ned Ferrers, the high-pitched laughter of Gustavus Moon, without listening and without understanding. For Moon had been wise enough to leave her by herself to read her letter, and to give her time to get over the effect of it.

When she had recovered a little, Nellie began to ask herself whether there were a loophole for escape from the hideous thought that was torturing her. She read the letter for the second time, and wondered whether her father could be suffering from delusions. Surely, she thought, since eight



III

months had passed without her hearing anything of his being released on account of his state of health, he must have misled her on that point! Had he duped himself also? Was he breaking down under the strain of prison life, and was he no longer in possession of all his reasoning powers?

The suggestion, sad as it was, afforded at least a hope that he might still be the victim she had always believed him to be, instead of one of the most wily and artful of criminals.

For it was clear even to her that, if he had really persisted in keeping the knowledge of the whereabouts of the Countess's diamond to himself for all these years, he was not only no injured innocent, but no ordinary victim of a momentary temptation.

Could it, after all, be possible that he was so mean, so base? Might not the letter be part of some plot of this man Moon, about whom she knew nothing but what was to his discredit?

Minutely examining the letter, however, she felt sure that it was no forgery. Or if it was, the imitation of her father's handwriting and the use of her pet name revealed no ordinary craft on the part of the forger.

She was still poring over the few lines in the obscurity behind the curtain, when she heard her own name uttered in Lord Alford's voice. A stirring, pleasant voice it was, with some notes of almost boyish joy in life still left in it. Wretched as she was, Nellie was glad to hear it.

"All by yourself in the dark! What's the matter? Is this yours?"

And he picked up, as he spoke, the envelope of the letter, and saw the name on it, and that it had not passed through the post.

She took it from him with a look of alarm which he could not fail to notice. He connected the look and the letter at once with Moon, and glanced at the young man, who was talking to Mrs. Long at the piano.

Nellie followed the direction of his eyes, and asked abruptly—

"Where did you meet Mr. Moon, Lord Alford? You

haven't known him long, have you?"

"Oh no. Met him for the first time this morning. He was with old Ferrers. He's a friend of his, so I asked him to come on with us, as he seemed rather a decent sort of fellow."

Nellie felt quite sure that, so far from being "a friend of" Ned Ferrers, the artful Moon must have scraped acquaintance with him either that morning or the previous evening, and that Moon had worked cleverly and successfully to get an invitation to Heynes Hall. Was it solely with a view to delivering the letter to her? She wondered. Then a bright idea struck her. If her father had wanted to convey to her the news of his approaching release in such a manner as not to alarm her, might he not have represented himself as better off then he was in order to secure the faithful delivery of the letter by Moon, whom perhaps he knew better than he trusted?

Perhaps Alaric Smith knew that Moon would spare no pains to oblige a man with money, and so practised upon him a comparatively innocent deception in the knowledge that he would take considerable pains to make the acquaintance of a girl with "expectations."

Any explanation, however far-fetched, of that dreadful letter was better than the plain meaning the words bore.

- "Don't you like him?" asked Lord Alford, after a pause, glancing at the letter which Nellie held in her hand, but without daring to ask her a question about it.
- "Oh, can one say whether one likes or dislikes a person one knows so little?"
- "Nonsense! I like you, and you like me, and yet we've only known each other three days."
- "In special circumstances though," replied Nell, with spirit. And then she hung her head; for the recollection



113

of her own rash act filled her with shame. "I should like anybody who behaved as you did."

"Oh, come, that's rather cutting. Wouldn't you have

liked me but for that accident?"

She looked thoughtful, and then she laughed shyly.

"Well, I dare say I couldn't have helped liking you!

"You wouldn't have approved of me, I suppose?" She laughed again and reddened, and bit her lip.

"I-I didn't mean that."

"Oh yes, you did though. And look here, I'm glad you wouldn't. You're very prim, and a bit of a prig, Nellie, but it's proper to be a prig at your age, and it makes me approve of you all the more."

But Nellie refused to take this as a compliment, and was

rather indignant.

"I'm not a prig, indeed," she said earnestly, "unless you mean that I can't play bridge."

"I wish I couldn't!" said he.

The girl looked much surprised.

"Do you mean that you'd like to be a prig, like me?"

"Yes, I do, emphatically I do," said he heartily. "I'm sick to death of the racket and the jar of it all! I should like to heave it all off my back with one great jerk-estate, mortgages, wife, the whole lot—to tell the Jews, and the Gentiles too, to go to the devil, and to be off to Manitoba with a ten-pound note and a spade."

Nellie did not smile. Her thoughts flew back to that loss he had sustained through her father—if, indeed, they could be said ever to be away from it. And there flashed into her mind an idea which brought a brightness to her eyes and a flush to her cheeks,

If she could be the means of getting that lost fortune back for him; if she could coax, persuade, insistsaw that something of moment was occupying her, and he looked at her curiously.

" You wouldn't think like that," she said suddenly, " if it were not for the money, would you?"

"What money?"

"If it were not for what you told me, mortgages, and—difficulties, and—and all that?"

"Perhaps not. Those things do make a difference.

But they're not everything. Why?"

"Oh, well—I wanted to know. I"—she was crushing the letter in her hand, and looking at it with steady, earnest eyes—"I suppose—if things were different—you—you wouldn't want so much what you call 'racket' to keep you from thinking?"

The question was so ingenuous, yet so simply and earnestly put, that the Earl could not forbear smiling. But he was moved too, and again he looked at her with so much kindness, so much interest, that she was made bold to go on—

"Of course you are laughing at me again for being a prig, but—well, it does seem a pity to have this lovely house, this palace, that seems as if it ought to be full of princes and princesses, given up to—just—bridge."

"Just-bridge. Very neatly put. But, frankly, if I had to choose between the guests I've got and princes and

princesses, I think I'd keep my noisy crew!"

But he was getting serious for all the light tone he kept up. As for Nellie, she was so full of the stirring new thoughts within her that she could not keep still, she could not rest. Springing up from her seat she crushed her letter and envelope into her pocket with a new light in her grey eyes.

"What's the matter?" said the Earl, gently, springing up too, and looking into her face almost shyly. "You look

like—Joan of Arc!"

"I've—I've only got an idea," she said. "And perhaps it isn't a good one. But I can't tell you what it is—yet."

A shrill voice called Lord Alford by name, and then



115

another, and he looked at Nellie, shrugged his shoulders, and laughed.

"More bridge!" said he, as he turned away to join the

rest of the party.

Gustavus Moon had been watching for his opportunity, and he now came up to Nellie with a malicious smile on his face.

"Rather rash of you to let Lord Alford monopolize you so much, isn't it?" said he. "Or are you too strongminded to care what people say?"

"What do you mean?"

"I suppose you know the sort of reputation he has? The sort of people he gets about him?"

"I know he's not particular enough about the friends he

makes, the people he picks up," retorted Nellie.

The malicious smile died out of Gustavus Moon's face.

"Oh, a man can afford to be talked about. A woman can't," said he. "I should advise you, Miss Smith, for your own sake, to be careful. Lord Alford is not the harmless, lamb-like creature you take him for."

"I haven't taken him for a harmless lamb, but for the most kind-hearted man I have ever met. And I like him better than any man I have ever known," added the girl,

staunchly.

Moon shrugged his shoulders and raised his eyebrows, in a manner which irritated Nellie, though she was too unsophisticated to understand all that the gestures implied. She turned away from him impatiently, and would have found refuge with some other companion, but that the rest were all engaged in cards, either playing or watching the players. All but Mrs. Dawes, whose manner towards Nellie was so consistently antagonistic and aggressive that the young girl shrank from approaching her.

Gustavus Moon saw her difficulty and laughed.

"You had better recognize your real friends, instead of snubbing them, Miss Smith," he said. "You may want

them presently. When your father comes back, for instance"—she stopped, and shivered, but she had to listen—"you will want, and he will want, sympathetic people to stand by you both. Is it wise, then, to take up this attitude towards me? After all, I've done you a service; if I made use of the facility with which Lord Alford brings strangers to his house, it was to fulfil my promise to your father."

His tone was warm, his words were apparently true. Still, she knew enough to make her mistrust him; and she was hesitating between two views of him, as the friend in need and as the thief who had robbed Mr. Bridger, doubting, perplexed, bewildered, when a footman came into the room and requested her to join Lady Alicia in the library.

And she guessed that Mr. Bridger had come. For one moment she hesitated. Then, turning to Gustavus Moon, she said—

"Will you come with me, Mr. Moon? I should like you to hear something Lady Alicia has to say."

For a moment there was a dubious look in his eyes. Of course he knew nothing about the solicitor's visit, but perhaps he was shrewd enough to know that Nellie's intentions towards him were not wholly amicable.

He ended, however, by agreeing to accompany her, and together they followed the servant through corridors and across halls, both silent and thoughtful.

Nellie's heart beat fast. She knew that, although she herself had not seen the face of the man who fought with Mr. Bridger, the solicitor could not have failed to do so, since part of the struggle took place in the lighted kitchen.

Once face to face with each other, neither man could fail to recognize the other if Moon were really the thief, as she believed. This recognition or non-recognition, therefore, would decide whether or not she could look upon Moon as trustworthy.

If he should prove to be the thief, Mr. Bridger's denunciation would relieve her mind. For she would then be sure



117

that the letter from her father was part of some plot con-

cocted by a man who was no better than a rascal.

When the footman threw open the door of the library, the first person Nellie caught sight of was Mr. Bridger himself, seated in an arm-chair, so bandaged and bound up that he was a pitiable spectacle. He had, however, the use of both eyes, and that he was in full possession of his mental faculties was proved by the way in which he was talking to Lady Alicia.

Nellie held her breath as she saw Gustavus Moon start slightly and take a backward step as if to escape from the room. She stepped back herself to prevent this.

Mr. Bridger had risen, and turned towards the new-

comers.

Lady Alicia looked at the young man in surprise. Nellie hastened to speak.

"I think, Mr. Bridger, you know Mr. Moon," she said.

There was a moment's pause, and she was quick to see that, as she expected, the men recognized each other at once. Then Mr. Bridger came forward.

But it was not to denounce the other. Holding out his hand, he said—

"I haven't that pleasure, but I'm delighted."

And the two men shook hands with great apparent cordiality.

CHAPTER XI

NELLIE felt ill with bewilderment and something more. That the lawyer and Moon recognized each other she felt sure. Yet Mr. Bridger, so far from denouncing the man who had robbed him, had shaken hands with him as if the meeting gave him great pleasure!

Was it because he was afraid of being denounced himself as a seeker after treasure to which he had no right?

"Mr. Moon is a friend of my father's, Mr. Bridger," said she. "Perhaps he can help you to find out who it was that did the damage to The Firs. Mr. Bridger says," she went on, turning to Moon, "that it was all done by the man who assaulted and robbed him yesterday."

Mr. Bridger appeared much confused by this speech, while Moon gave such an ugly grin, showing the gap on each side of his mouth where some of his upper teeth were missing, that Nellie felt more certain than before that he was really the man who had struggled so desperately with the lawyer.

Lady Alicia looked not only mystified but offended by these proceedings, which were no part of the programme she had drawn up for this interview.

"I don't see," she now said, with dignity, "that Mr. Moon can help us in this matter, Miss Smith. Perhaps you are not aware why I asked Mr. Bridger to come."

And the little old lady turned her back upon Mr. Moon with so much decision that the young man, perceiving that Bridger was in no greater anxiety to detain him than the



119

ladies, shuffled to the door, and, muttering a sort of apology with a wicked look at Nellie, left the room.

Nellie would have liked to make her escape too. She felt that she hated all these people, Lady Alicia as well as the rest, as soon as she found out the reason why the solicitor had been sent for.

"Miss Smith and I," began the old lady, "both think that she ought to have the keys of her father's house, in order that she may find out exactly the extent of the damage that has been done to it while it has been in your care, Mr. Bridger."

The solicitor grew quite white.

"Surely you don't accuse me of neglecting my late

partner's interests, your ladyship !" said he.

"I think it is advisable that his daughter should be satisfied that the house has been taken proper care of," replied the old lady, icily. "When she has gone over it again, she will be better able to decide whether that is the case."

"But this is scarcely the moment, when, as I have said, the place has evidently been ransacked by some mischievous

person, probably by the man who set upon me!"

"On the contrary, she thinks, and I think, that this is the right moment to make investigations," said Lady Alicia. "We shall be glad, Mr. Bridger, if you will let us have the keys."

Shaking from head to foot, and vainly endeavouring to

hide his consternation, the solicitor said-

"I—I really think I am not justified——'

Lady Alicia turned abruptly to the girl.

"My dear," she said dryly, "I should advise you to insist."

"I insist," said Nellie, mechanically.

Mr. Bridger made a staggering step towards the door, as if so much overwhelmed that he scarcely knew what he was doing. Recovering himself, and turning round just far

enough for them to see that he was whiter than ever and very much agitated, he said in an altered voice—

"I—I haven't the keys with me now, of course. But—in the morning I will bring them, and I will accompany Miss Smith—Nellie, over the house. She can then—then—"

"Make a thorough examination. Yes, that will be best. And now tell me, Mr. Bridger, have the police made any discoveries with regard to the man who set upon you, and whom you suspect of having done all the damage?"

Although Nellie was now convinced that Mr. Bridger was a hypocrite, she felt a strange qualm on seeing the crest-fallen condition to which he was reduced. He had always carried himself very erect, beamed upon the world through his gold spectacles with an air of benevolence and philanthropy, and worn, in every movement of his portly person, in every leisurely stroke of his white beard, the aspect of a good man to whom the world is kind.

It was horrible to have to find him out, to have to suspect him of deeds which even now she scarcely dared to ascribe to him.

But yet, if it was not he who had done this damage to the house, who was it? When set upon on the previous day and accused of hunting for diamonds which were not his, he had said no word in self-defence, denial, or explanation. This silence, when attacked, was eloquent of guilt, so Nellie thought.

His consternation on being so straightforwardly questioned by Lady Alicia was more eloquent still.

"To tell you the truth," he said, in a husky voice, after a moment's hesitation, "I have thought it better not to call in the aid of the police at all. You must both know, ladies," he went on, glancing now at Nellie also, "that for many reasons we do not wish to have The Firs talked about and made an object of curiosity and gossip to the public."

"Oh yes, yes, I understand that," said Lady Alicia.

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"Still, I should have thought that, after being attacked so ferociously, you would have consulted the police for your

own personal safety."

"I put the interests of those who are unable to protect themselves before my own, Lady Alicia," replied Mr. Bridger, with something of his usual pompously benevolent tone. Then again he spoke to Nellie. "I think also, my dear, that I ought to have you in my house now you have left school. Lady Alicia took my breath away when she told me of her goodness in having you here."

Nellie could scarcely refrain from showing her surprise

and disgust at this very new solicitude on her account.

But before she could answer Lady Alicia spoke quite decisively.

"Miss Smith is very well where she is for the present, I think, Mr. Bridger. You can trust her with me."

"Oh, of course, of course, your ladyship. I didn't mean

to suggest---"

The lady cut him short. "Then we will drive over to The Firs to-morrow morning, say at twelve o'clock? Will that suit you?"

"Oh, perfectly. Any time most convenient to you."

He hurried out, not without a vain attempt to obtain a few minutes' conversation with Nellie, who would not see his significant glances. The poor child felt that she hated all these greedy people, who had but one idea in their minds in the midst of all their kind solicitude for her.

To find the countess's diamond was the one wish of all their hearts, and she was being used as a ball, thrown from the one to the other, as best suited the game of each one.

No wonder she looked pale and worried, and that Lady Alicia noticed it and sent her off to bed! Nellie was glad enough to go, for she began to feel that the noisy gathering contained hidden dangers for her. There was Gustavus Moon to be faced, in the first place, who filled her with excusable mistrust. And there was Lord Alford, whose

kindness to her was already being misinterpreted by more than one member of the party. She was glad to escape from them all, and to shut herself in her own rooms, where she looked round with a sorrowful feeling that she would not retain possession of them for long.

That she could not stay at Heynes Hall she felt sure. Lady Alicia would be as eager to get rid of her as she had been to shelter her, when once her curiosity about the contents of The Firs was set at rest. So Nellie told herself, her experiences having already made her cynical and bitter.

On the following morning she and Lady Alicia started for The Firs in the big family carriage, which the Earl himself never used. He had heard of the proposed expedition with some surprise, and, though no one told him enough for him to guess the real motive of it, he had a feeling that it was scarcely decent on the part of any member of the household to intrude upon the premises of Alaric Smith.

Lady Alicia, however, was careful to explain that she only went as guardian and companion to Nellie, and as the girl agreed to this, he made on further objection. It was plain that the real object of the expedition never entered his head.

On arriving at The Firs at the appointed time, the ladies were hardly surprised to learn from Mrs. Barr that Mr. Bridger was there already.

"Why, Miss Nellie, he and his son must have come almost afore it was light," she said, as she let them in at the side gate, the big central gates being long since out of use. "For when I went up to the 'ouse this morning, as I mostly do first thing to see as all is right, who should I see but them two at the landing window, a-putting in the pane of glass their own selves!"

The ladies were hardly surprised at this news, nor was Nellie greatly astonished when, on arriving at the house with Lady Alicia, they found both the solicitor and his son smiling on the doorstep, ready to admit them.

123

Bram looked flushed, and his father looked pale, but this was hardly to be wondered at, Nellie thought, when she and Lady Alicia made the tour of the house, and found everything in as perfect order as on the day when Alaric Smith left it.

Here and there, indeed, the sharp feminine eyes discovered signs that no neat-handed Phyllis had been at work in the general cleaning and clearing which had undoubtedly taken place since Nellie last saw the house.

Dust had been heaped up in obscure corners and never cleared away; books had been replaced on the shelves without much regard to their relative positions; and a certain heavy, dust-laden atmosphere suggested that the cleaning had been a very recent affair indeed.

"There isn't really so very much the matter with the house, considering how long it's been shut up!" hazarded Mr. Bridger, buoyantly, as he followed the ladies about from room to room.

"No," said Lady Alicia with a snap.

How dearly she would have loved to peep and pry about in her turn Nellie knew, as she watched the old lady's keen eyes darting hither and thither, and noted the furtive examination to which she subjected walls and cupboards as she went along.

Neither she nor Nellie made any remark about the change which had been wrought in the house; and the inspection wenf forward pleasantly enough until, as the ladies stood once more upon the doorstep on their way out, Lady Alicia said—

"And now, Mr. Bridger, I'm sure you will be quite glad to give up the custody of the house to Miss Smith, and she and I will undertake to keep it in order till her father's return."

This astounding proposition took Mr. Bridger's breath away. But the little lady was firm. And as Nellie, who felt that, if anybody had the right to pry about the house, it

was the person who did so on behalf of Lord Alford, joined in insisting upon this right, Mr. Bridger, urged on by the expressive nods and grimaces of his son, gave way, and very reluctantly handed over the keys of the house to the triumphant ladies.

They did not, however, wait to make more investigations then. Lady Alicia, satisfied with her victory, locked the house-door on the inside with her own hands, and going out by the backway with the rest, saw the solicitor and his son on their way down the drive before she and Nellie fastened the two padlocks which secured the door, and went slowly towards the carriage.

Nellie was very quiet: she was making up her mind. The old lady noticed, when they got into the carriage, that she was very pale, and asked her if she felt ill.

"No," said Nellie, "I'm not ill, only afraid you'll be angry at what I'm going to say. I want to go away—to go to London."

But Lady Alicia showed little concern: now that she had the keys of The Firs, what became of Nellie did not so much matter.

The girl ran upstairs, when they got back to Heynes Hall, with a fast-beating heart. The worst trial was to come. She had to see Lord Alford on an important matter. Chance favoured her, and she found him waiting for her at the bottom of the great oak staircase.

"Well, Nellie," said he, "so I hear you want to run away? You've soon got tired of us!"

Nellie smiled with a little quiver of the muscles.

"I'm going to ask a favour of you though, first, Lord Alford," she said under her breath.

"Well, what is it?"

"You remember saying you would help me if ever I wanted to sell my mother's old paste ornaments."

"Perfectly."

"I want you to help me now. If I show you some of

125

them, you'll know just what they ought to be worth, won't you?"

"I don't know about that, but I can give you some idea, I dare say. Come in here."

They went into the library, and he placed a broad, deep - morocco-covered armchair for her near the window.

"Now then, let's have a look at them."

He had seen that she was carrying a small old-fashioned wooden workbox. This she now unlocked on her knees.

"You are to promise," she said, as she held the lid down and looked up earnestly, "not to pretend they are worth more than they are, and to buy them yourself. Because that I refuse to allow."

He laughed, and nodded.

"All right. But really I'm not half so benevolent as you suppose."

"Never mind what I suppose. I've got your promise.

Now, what is that worth?"

She handed him a very shabby old case, which he at once opened. It contained a miniature, set in the "paste" of which she had spoken. She looked down into the box and selected another case, but then, looking up, she saw that his face had changed, and that he was staring at the miniature with started eyes.

"Oh! What is it? What is it?" almost screamed

the girl.

He started again, recovered himself and laughed discordantly. And as he spoke she noticed that even his voice had become harsh and different. He thrust the miniature, case and all, back into her hand.

"Put them away, put them away, child," he said hastily. "I'm awfully sorry to disappoint you. But you mustn't offer them for sale anywhere, anywhere. They're—they're

utterly worthless, not worth—a rap!"

CHAPTER XII

Nor worth a rap! Her treasures that she had been taught to look upon as something to depend upon, something that might prove to be worth quite a large sum!

Nellie was bewildered. The Earl was abrupt, almost harsh in his manner as he thrust back the miniature into her hand, and immediately walked away to the end of the room, as if the very fact of such rubbish being offered for his inspection was almost an affront.

She rose to her feet, shutting up her workbox, but still holding in her hand the offending miniature. She was at first half declined to ask him to see the rest of the paste, but as he still remained with his back towards her, walking away towards the fireplace, she changed her mind, and went quickly out of the room without a word.

After all, she thought, she had not understood the difference there was between men of Lord Alford's rank and other people. He was always so kind, so genial, so unassuming, that she had been led to forget that he was a nobleman, to whom cheap things, imitation jewellery, and such shams were an abomination.

And yet—she paused a moment at the foot of the great staircase, and peered down at the little painting in her hand. It seemed to her, as it had always seemed, a most beautiful thing, delicate, dainty, charming. And as for the rim of sparkling white gems which surrounded it, she had always thought they must be the very best paste, and extremely

I 27

valuable, even as imitation stones, for they flashed in the sun or in artificial light in a way that dazzled her.

It seemed strange, too, that he had not expressed any disgust when she first mentioned that her mother's iewellery was only paste. He had professed, indeed, to know something about such things, and to be quite willing to help her in disposing of them.

Thinking over these things, and suffering meanwhile from a very keen feeling of disappointment at the unexpected breakdown of her belief in her own resources, Nellie, still holding her workbox in one hand and the miniature in the other, reached the first story, where she paused for an instant on the landing to open the box with the object of replacing the despised picture.

The door of the great gallery was open in front of her. Instinctively glancing that way in order to make sure that she was unobserved, for she now felt as much ashamed of her poor little treasures as she had previously been proud of them, she caught sight of one of the family portraits, which hung against the panelled walls, and was struck by a resemblance in outline between the figure there represented and the miniature in her hand.

Entering the gallery, she went quickly up to the portrait which had attracted her attention, and looking first at her own little picture and then at the larger one on the wall, she saw that they were so like each other as to suggest that the one was a copy of the other.

Both pictures represented a lady in the dress of the eighteenth century, young, handsome, smiling, with her fair hair built up high, and a white scarf floating about her white shoulders.

Nellie saw at once that they were indeed taken from the same original, and she wondered whether Lord Alford had noticed the fact. Careless as he was, it was very possible that he had never taken the pains to examine carefully the long rows of ladies and gentleman, in the costumes of the

128

various generations from the sixteenth to the twentieth, who frowned and smiled from the walls of the gallery, the halls and the staircases of the mansion.

While she was still staring intently at the picture above her, and comparing it line for line with her little one, some one came into the gallery from the end near which she stood, and, peeping over her shoulder, caught sight of what she held in her hand.

"Ho, ho!" cried a voice which she recognized as that of Miss Dawes, "where did you get that pretty thing, Miss Innocence?"

Nellie started violently, and instantly made an attempt to open her mother's workbox and to replace the miniature in it. But her agitation made her clumsy, for the voice of Miss Dawes was full of unpleasant suggestion; the box fell to the floor, the tray came out, and various other trinkets which formed part of her treasure began to peep out of their respective coverings of silk and cotton wool.

She had stooped to pick them up when Miss Dawes, stooping too, snatched the miniature out of her hand. At the same time she looked closely at something sparkling which had escaped from its covering.

"What's that?" she asked curiously, as Nellie replaced it in the box.

"Only a necklace that belonged to my mother," replied the girl, very angry at this interference, and scarcely able to keep her temper. "Please give me back my picture."

Miss Dawes was examining it closely and giggling with unmistakable malice.

"Oh, certainly, I'll give it you back! I don't want to get you into trouble with Lord Alford—or—your mother!"

"My mother is dead," said Nellie, hardly able to retain her self-control.

"Ah! Lord Alford isn't, though—luckily for you! I wish he'd give me such nice presents!"

Nellie uttered an exclamation of impatience.



129

"Lord Alford has never given me any present," she said sharply. "It's only a coincidence that my miniature is like one of his pictures. Probably they are both copies of one in the National Gallery or the South Kensington Museum."

"Ah! And pray, is it only a coincidence that this one is mounted in diamonds? Or perhaps your mother had a

collection of valuable diamonds, Miss Smith?"

This was more than Nellie could bear. Turning to her tormenter with flashing eyes, she said—

"Those are not diamonds; they are only paste. Lord Alford himself said so!"

Miss Dawes burst into a fit of apparently uncontrollable merriment.

"Oh, Lord Alford himself said so, did he? Then I should advise you, my dear, not to put too much reliance on what Lord Alford says about the presents he gives you. I say the stones round your miniature are diamonds, and very good diamonds. And I think I ought to know!"

Then a great fear seized Nellie and struck her dumb. For the moment she stood still, staring at the mocking woman before her, holding out her hand stiffly but without

moving a muscle. She began to understand.

Miss Dawes, who, malicious as jealousy could make her, was not without the easy good-nature so common in women of her type, was mollified when she saw how genuine the girl's distress and perplexity were. Giving back the miniature at once, she said in a lower and more serious tone—

"There, there, don't make a fuss. These stones are real diamonds, and so, I expect, are those in the necklace that I saw peeping out of your box. Of course, it's no business of mine what you choose to accept from Lord Alford. But as you seem a good, straight little girl, and not very knowing yet, let me advise you never to take presents at all, or you never know how deep your obligation may be?"

Nellie shook her head and began a fresh protest. But Miss Dawes would not listen. Refusing to heed her, she

130

went on her way through the gallery, singing as she walked, and turning at the door, to laugh back, half mockingly, half good-humouredly, at the unhappy girl.

For Nellie knew now what was the meaning of Lord Alford's strange behaviour. She knew that he must have recognized in the diamond-mounted miniature one of the family jewels which had been lost for so long, and she had not the least doubt that the rest of "her mother's paste" would prove to be more valuable jewellery from the same source.

Although the deep sense of shame she felt for the moment paralyzed her, Nellie soon recovered from this, and fell into a state of wild enthusiam over the conduct of the Earl, who, even at such a moment as that in which he recognized some of his own stolen property, forbore to pain her by letting her know the truth.

Pierced to the heart though she was by the degradation of her position, and by the now indisputable fact of her father's guilt, there now rose up in her a longing to do something to repair the wrong, and a belief that she would be able to accomplish this.

If only she could succeed where all these greedy searchers had failed, find the Countess's diamond, and restore it to its owner! That would be something to live for, something worth striving for; and she began to picture to herself what she would feel if she could put the great undiscovered stone herself in the hand that had done so much for her.

In a sort of ecstasy—for she felt that her newborn wish was an inspiration—she went out of the gallery and upstairs. They were looking for her to summon her to a late luncheon with Lady Alicia, since they had been so long over their expedition to The Firs that they had missed the usual meal.

Lady Alicia wondered at the change in the girl. Nellie was bright, talkative, lively, unlike herself as she had so far appeared since her arrival at Heynes Hall. The truth was,

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133

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She would go to Lo and do her best to make h he returned to her.

Lady Alicia gave her so perils for a young girl, and so conviction; for, indeed, La who could ever have had much subject.

After luncheon the girl wa will, to follow Lady Alicia into rest of the house-party were a some unpleasant results of the mo incidents, and she was right. There was a movement, an exchange of whispers and glances, among some of the party, which brought the colour to her cheeks, and made her aware that Miss Dawes had not kept to herself the incident in the gallery.

She took her seat, however, as near to Lady Alicia as possible, knowing that there she was pretty safe from open attack.

But when Lord Alford came in, and studiously refrained from glancing in her direction, although it was his usual habit to give her a nod and a smile whenever he passed her, she felt a pang which not all her efforts at stoicism enabled her to repress.

Although he knew that she herself was innocent as a child in the matter of the theft, she felt that, involuntarily, he was influenced by the remembrance of the wrong her father had done him, brought back thus suddenly and unexpectedly to his mind.

With the tears very near her eyes, she was bending mechanically to pick up the grey worsted ball which Lady Alicia had just dropped on the floor for the fifth time in ten minutes, when she heard the high-pitched voice of

130

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LOVE AND LORDSHIP that the period of suspense was over for action was come.

She would go to London, earn what me and do her best to make her father content with he returned to her.

Lady Alicia gave her sage advice as to London amperils for a young girl, and she listened meekly but without conviction; for, indeed, Lady Alicia was not a person who could ever have had much practical knowledge of the subject.

After luncheon the girl was obliged, much against her will, to follow Lady Alicia into the Rose Room, where the rest of the house-party were assembled. She expected some unpleasant results of the morning's incidents, and she There was a movement, an exchange of was right. whispers and glances, among some of the party, which brought the colour to her cheeks, and made her aware that Miss Dawes had not kept to herself the incident in the gallery.

She took her seat, however, as near to Lady Alicia as possible, knowing that there she was pretty safe from open attack.

But when Lord Alford came in, and studiously refrained from glancing in her direction, although it was his usual habit to give her a nod and a smile whenever he passed her, she felt a pang which not all her efforts at stoicism enabled her to repress.

Although he knew that she herself was innocent as a child in the matter of the theft, she felt that, involuntarily, he was influenced by the remembrance of the wrong her father had done him, brought back thus suddenly and unexpectedly to his mind.

With the tears very near her eyes, she was bending mechanically to pick up the grey worsted ball which Lady Alicia had just dropped on the floor for the fifth time in ten minutes, when she heard the high-pitched voice of

Gustavus Moon close to her, and saw that he was pointing to a paragraph in a newspaper which he held.

"I think this will interest you, Miss Smith," he said in

a low voice, as he handed her the paper.

132

She took it with a sense of foreboding. The paragraph ran thus:—

"An Echo of a Famous Case.

"We learn that the convict Alaric Smith, who figured prominently in a cause cellebre still fresh in the public mind, is about to be released with some years yet to run of his sentence, as his state of health makes his death only a matter of weeks."

Nellie repressed the cry that rose to her lips, and gave the paper back without a word. She was deadly pale, but momentous as the news was, she was not unprepared for it, and it was not the shock to her that it would have been a few days before.

Moon folded the paper, and said in a low voice-

"I—I told you what was going to happen. I brought you the news. I said you would want a friend, and now you see I was right."

"Thank-you!" said Nellie, briefly.

She was already wondering how this man was to be shaken off, and that other no less to be dreaded friend, Joel Bridger.

In the mean time she must lose not a moment. Mr. Bridger would probably have received some official intimation of her father's release, and she must prepare for it without delay.

She resolved to go away at once, and without taking formal leave of any one except Lady Alicia, to whom she at once whispered a few words, intimating her wish, and giving the reason.

The old lady, though taken by surprise, made no



133

objection; the only point upon which she was uneasy was the giving up of the keys of The Firs, which the girl herself had to suggest.

"I suppose you must have them, if you can't trust me with them," she said rather acidly.

And while Nellie, who at once went up to her rooms, was dressing, the keys were brought to her.

She had asked that her two little trunks, which she had packed and locked, should be sent to Mr. Bridger's for her, and then, having only one thing more to do, she went softly down to the first floor, passed quickly through the gallery, and entered the wing where Lord Alford's private rooms were. He was still downstairs, playing bridge with the rest, as she knew. His study window having been pointed out to her from the grounds, she knew where his room was, and going in quickly, she looked about for a place where she could put the little neatly tied-up parcel, directed to him, which she held tightly against her breast.

A desk near the window seemed to be a promising receptacle. The chair in front of it looked as if it had been constantly used.

She tried the lid; it was not locked. Slipping her parcel hastily inside, she ran out of the room, and into the arms of Miss Dawes, who must have followed her and waited for her.

A burst of mocking laughter disconcerted the girl. Then Miss Dawes spoke, but in no laughing tone.

"I thought you were not as innocent as you look, Miss Smith," she said icily; "and as we are all made to suffer for the Earl's partiality for you, I am going to report the real state of the case to—Lad? Alford."

CHAPTER XIII

Miss Dawes drew herself up, and towered majestically, from the height of her massive five feet eight inches, down upon Nellie, who, though a well-grown girl, was willowy rather than wide-shouldered, and who looked more than usually childish as she stood, with her hair tied in a loose plait and her sailor hat, wearing an expression of bewilderment on her little features.

"Oh, will you?" she said vaguely. "Report to Lady Alford? What will you report to her?"

"I think you know, Miss Innocence. None of us come up into this wing uninvited, except you."

"Oh, very well. Report what you like," said Nellie, wearily.

She had lived at high pressure during the past few days, and a trifle like this did not much matter, she thought.

Miss Dawes was taken aback by this indifference, and muttering something about "innocence being very like impudence, only rather more so," she suffered the girl to escape downstairs by way of the gallery, whence she slipped out of the house by one of the garden-doors, and made straight for the path which led to the station.

She had learnt that there was a walk of only a mile by this path across the fields, and she started at a brisk pace, feeling half glad to be away from the mansion and free to go where she would, and half sorry to have had to go without one more kind word from Lord Alford.

Across the park, by a side-gate into the fields, and then

135

in a straight line until she was close to the little country station, where she knew she would have nearly an hour to wait for her train.

But just as she reached the stile that led into the road, she caught sight of the wheel of a motor-bicycle behind the hedge, and checking herself, she saw that the man standing beside it was the Earl.

He stepped suddenly into full view when she paused.

"Come along," said he; and to her great joy she saw that his usual good humour had returned. "Come along and be scolded."

Trying to laugh, but not succeeding, except in a half-hearted sort of way, she came slowly to the stile, but remained on the field side.

"Well," said he, leaning on the top bar, and looking curiously into her face, "and now what have you got to say for yourself?"

"You mean—for—for running away?" she said, her

voice not very steady.

"Yes, for that among other things. But there are a lot of other things." It was his turn to hesitate and grow shy. Then, suddenly blushing like a school-boy, he said, bending forward and speaking hurriedly, "You—you shouldn't have given me back those things, you know, without speaking to me about it. How did you find out?"

Nellie choked back a sob that rose to her throat. She also blushed, and leaned forward earnestly, so that the two looked like a pair of overgrown children exchanging secrets.

"I—I saw the likeness between my miniature and—and one of the pictures in the gallery. And then, while I was looking at them, Miss Dawes came in and—and said the stones were real diamonds. Then—then I knew."

"Poor child."

Then she looked up quickly, with earnest eyes and voice.

"Oh, but I'm glad I know-glad, glad. Now perhaps I

can do something. At any rate, I won't leave a stone unturned! I shan't see you, or write to you, or send you any message unless—unless I have something to tell you, something important, about—the great thing!"

He shook his head, and putting his hand on that one of hers with which she was clutching the top bar of the stile,

he smiled in the old kind way.

136

"My dear child, you can do nothing, nothing whatever, except what you have done. You'll get into a row for that, unless you make up some story of losing or selling the things. It's a sorry thing to have to admit, but you were deceived in your father, and, by Jove! you nearly made me doubt whether I hadn't been deceived in him too!"

Nellie hung her head.

"That's the worst thing of all," she whispered, "to have to know that! I had lived in such a silly dreamland, and now it's all gone. I know that I shall be fond of him when he comes back, ill and broken. You know he's coming?" she added under her breath.

He nodded.

"Well, I dare say I shall feel differently when I see him. But just now it's dreadful to have to meet him—dreadful. To think that I shall have to fight, and battle, and struggle, not only with others, but with my own father!"

"And it will all be of no use," said the Earl, philosophically. "Depend upon it, Nellie, a man doesn't set his teeth as he must have set his, for all these years, to give way and let himself be talked round in the end! No, take my word for it, you'll never get him to make restitution. I'm convinced of it."

"Well, if he can't, perhaps I can," said she. "At any rate, Lord Alford, I mean to try."

Even as she spoke, however, a sudden remembrance of the fact that she had not one will, but three fighting against hers, made her change colour and utter-a little despairing cry.

137

He laughed.

"You won't succeed," said he. "And if you were to be the person to benefit by my loss, really, Nellie, I shouldn't much mind. Only I'm afraid you'll find there are more wits at work in this business than you think. I never thought that sanctimonious old Bridger was as innocent as he pretended."

"I'm sure he's not," said she, promptly. "And there's another of them, Lord Alford. There's that man Moon.

He's just as bad as-Bridger."

"Moon! Really?"

The Earl looked incredulous. But she did not like to say more; and, seized by the sudden recollection of the fact that even these admissions of hers were something like treason to her own father, she turned away and put her handkerchief to her eyes.

"There, don't cry," said Lord Alford.

He too, was infinitely puzzled by the situation. Here, in the fact that Alaric Smith had dared to give some five thousand pounds' worth of the jewels he had stolen to his own daughter, was absolute proof that his guilt had been in no way exaggerated. And although no suspicion of the hunt for the big diamond which had been going on had ever entered the Earl's head, it was impossible to doubt that Smith knew where to lay his hand upon it.

How was he to be stopped from converting that also to his own use? To set a police-watch on him might not only prevent Smith's using the diamond himself, but cause it to be lost for ever.

On the whole, the best thing to do seemed to be to trust to luck, and especially to the wits of this girl, whose whole heart was set upon restitution.

He was greatly touched by her grief, and by her gratitude.

"Don't cry," he said again.

"I'm always crying now!" said she, impatiently drying

her eyes. "And I know it's the silliest thing I can do. I've got to act, to pretend things are all right when they're all wrong. And oh! It's going to be horribly, horribly difficult!"

She shuddered. The thought of battling with those three, with the greedy Bridger, the artful Moon, and, above all, with that father whom she had thought she knew so well, and whom she was now proved not to have known at all, was a terrible one.

Lord Alford saw something of her feeling in her face.

"Come, cheer up," said he. "We all have our troubles, you know. At any rate, you're not—married!"

The remembrance of the threat made by Miss Dawes

came back to Nellie's mind.

"Is Lady Alford such a very dreadful person?" she asked ingenuously.

He laughed out in the old hearty, boyish way.

"Oh no, not in the least—to anybody but me! I believe she's quite a charming woman—away from home. Only we've never hit it off, that's all."

"I'm so sorry; so very sorry."

"Why?"

"Oh, because I should like you to have everything in the world that was best, and every happiness possible for a man to have—just because you've been so good to me," said Nellie.

"Good to you! Everybody's good to pretty, nice little girls!"

"No," said Nellie, obstinately. "Everybody isn't. Perhaps I've been unlucky, but my experience is that men think girls pretty and nice only when they think they've got a pretty and nice little fortune."

"You cynical little creature! How did you find that out?"

"Never mind. I think we've said enough about myself. I must go to the station now, Lord Alford, to be ready when my train comes in."

139

"Well, come along then."

"I want you to say good-bye and go away first."

His face changed a little as he drew back from the gate.

"Oh, good-bye," he said as he raised his hat, half-turned away, and then immediately came back.

"You were afraid I was going to ask you to kiss me,"

he said.

"No, I wasn't, Lord Alford."

She was still on her side of the stile. He hesitated.

"Well, what would you have said if I had?"

"I should have said—that it was—not like you."

"Oh, on the contrary, it would have been very like me," retorted he. "I always kiss a pretty girl when I get the chance."

She looked at him gravely.

"It would not have been like you to me," she said simply.

He reddened and bit his lip.

"You're right, Nellie," said he, gently. "Come over, child. You're quite safe."

She came over at once, as neatly and prettily as a bird, and they walked up towards the station together. At the foot of the little hill he stopped.

"I won't come right up with you," he said. "The people gossip, and they mustn't about you. What money have you?"

She grey very red.

"Well, not much," she said, "but enough to take me to Bath."

"To Bath? Are you going to old Bridger's?"

"I must."

"Well, take this, then. It will help you along. You won't think that wrong, will you, since you gave up to me what you depended upon?"

She looked up straightforwardly and took the five-pound

note he offered without a scruple.

"It's very kind of you," she said. "Thank you very

Now I needn't ask Mr. Bridger for money, as I should have hated to have to do!"

She put the note in her purse, and Lord Alford hesitated. "Nellie," said he, "I hate the thought of your going away. "It's downright silly how I feel about you, child."

"Now I," answered the girl, sagely, "am glad I'm going away. I like to carry away just this remembrance of you, as I've seen you to-day, just-perfect-and-well; I-I mustn't say what I think. But it's better to go, and I'm glad I'm going. Good-bye."

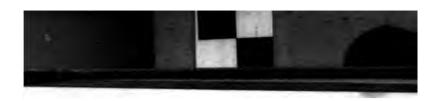
He took her hand and held it in his, but he did not say one word. The muscles of his face were quivering, and there passed over his face a look as if some good spirit had been hovering over him and was now vanishing from his sight.

They heard the station-bell, and she drew her hand

"Good-bye," she said again, as she turned to run up the little hill.

"Good-bye, Nellie."

He got on his cycle, and was off before the train slowed down. She watched him from the window of the railway carriage with a horrible sense that it would be better for them both if they were never to meet again.



CHAPTER XIV

MR. BRIDGER had left his office by the time Nellie reached Bath, so she was obliged to go to his house, which was one of a row of tall and rather stately old houses near the river, decorous, dull, heavy, and cheerless, from its cold outside to its colder inside.

Nellie remembered the stiff drawing-room, though she had not been in it for half a dozen years. The wall-paper was Early Victorian, the cottage piano had a drawn-silk front of the same period, while the painted china clock on the mantelpiece was under a glass shade, and the same precaution was used for the preservation of a basketful of wax flowers on a little table in the window.

Nellie sat down on one of the gilt chairs, impressed with a strong sense of the difference between this and the house she had just left. The maid had lighted one burner of the old-fashioned three-light chandelier that hung in the middle of the ceiling; and there was just light enough for the huge mirrors above the gilt console-tables to look as if they were reflecting dim ghosts in the unlighted corners of the far end of the room.

She dreaded the meeting with Mr. Bridger, whom she had never liked, and the sight of whom now filled her with disgust. She dreaded the gawky and uncouth Bram. More than all, she dreaded Mrs. Bridger, the solicitor's second wife, who had always looked at her with as suspicious an eye as if the poor girl had been tainted with the crime for which her father had been convicted.

Nellie would have avoided this visit if she could, and she

beat her foot on the carpet, impatient to get it over.

To her surprise, when at last the door opened, Mrs. Bridger came in with outstretched hand, and a smile of galvanic cordiality on her face. She was a thin, middle-aged woman who wore spectacles, and the very cut of her plain stuff dress, the smooth flattening down of her greyish hair, the angle at which she carried her thin arms, all seemed to proclaim her what she was, a person of strict evangelical principles, with a leaning to Calvinism.

"I am indeed relieved to see that you have escaped from that abode of unrighteousness, Heynes Hall," said she, as she shook hands. "Mr. Bridger and I and Bram have been in great tribulation on your account, Eleanor. Pray, how

did you make your escape?"

"I just came away. Nobody tried to stop me," said Nellie. "I had to see Mr. Bridger, to ask if he had any

news of my father."

"Yes," said Mrs. Bridger. "He has. News partly bad and partly good. Your father will be released in a day or two, but I'm grieved to tell you that he is ill, very ill indeed."

"Yes, I know," faltered Nellie, who did not know what to believe about this illness, after the letter she had received. "I want to know when I'm to go to meet him."

"Mr. Bridger will be up in a few moments, and Bram, who is as pleased as we are that you have come to us."

Nellie explained that she had no intention of staying with them, but Mrs. Bridger overruled her with great peremptoriness, and said that, being her guardians during her father's absence, they were only too glad to have her with them again.

"You are very kind—now," cried Nellie, cut to the heart by this sudden display of hospitality, after the neglect

she had experienced at her hands.

Mrs. Bridger looked alarmed.

143

"I see you are hurt because we felt so strongly your treatment of Bram," she said. "But I hope you won't bear malice because of that. It would be very unchristian, when Mr. Bridger has been looking after you all these years!"

Before Nellie could answer, Mr. Bridger and his son came in, and the girl saw at once that the whole family was in a state of great alarm at the unexpected return of Alaric Smith, and anxious to get her to overlook any shortcomings in their treatment of her, as well as to keep silence as to the strange incidents which had occurred in the shut-up house.

"If your father is as ill as I judge by the letter I've received from the prison authorities," he said, "I'm afraid the shock of hearing that The Firs was broken into would do him serious harm. I should strongly advise you, Eleanor, not to say anything about the burglary until he is better."

"I won't promise anything," said Nellie, quietly. "Of course I must see him before I can tell how much he could bear to hear."

There was a moment's dead silence. Then Mrs. Bridger said—

"She is right. I'm sure we can count upon her discretion. And now tell us, are all the dreadful things true that they say about Heynes Hall? Is it true that the shutters are kept shut and the gas going all day, that they may sit playing cards and drinking champagne without seeing the daylight?"

To her own amazement, Nellie burst out laughing.

"No, indeed it isn't true," said she. "At least, nothing of the sort went on while I was there."

"But they do gamble?"

"They do play cards."

"The devil's books!" murmured Mr. Bridger, behind his gold spectacles.

Nellie got to hate the glitter of those three pairs of glasses turned constantly upon her as she gave an account of

her visit, and toned down as much as she could their extravagant notions of the Earl's way of life. First Mr. Bridger's gold spectacles were flashed upon her, then his wife's, and finally, there were Bram's pince-nez glittering as he slowly shook his head.

"You must be very glad to get away from such a sink

of perdition!" said Mrs. Bridger, solemnly.

"Full of pitfalls for the young and unwary," added Mr. Bridger.

Then Bram spoke.

"I dare say," he said, contemplatively, "it wasn't so bad to live in as it seems to us. Some of those people have _-pleasant ways."

Nellie laughed merrily.

"Of course they have," said she, "or Lord Alford wouldn't have his house full of them."

Mr. and Mrs. Bridger both compressed their lips.

"That sort of society," said the lady, "is especially harmful to young people, who get carried away, and who look upon Christian households as dull by comparison."

"Well, we are a trifle dull, mother," put in Bram.

"And I dare say Eleanor will feel it."

"I hope not, Bram, I hope not. I don't think so ill of her," said his step-mother, solemnly.

Nellie felt it wiser not to express any opinion, and then Mr. Bridger took her aside, and discussed with her the arrangements to be made for her father's return.

It was settled that he should take her as far as Portsmouth, where she would remain while he crossed to the Isle of Wight, Alaric Smith being at Parkhurst. She had no longer that passionate longing to see her father that she had had for all these years, and she acquiesced at once in the suggestion that she should let the first meeting be between the two men.

By the time her father reached Portsmouth he would have settled what he meant to do, and she and Mr. Bridger



145

would accompany him either to The Firs or wherever he wished to go.

In the mean time she was to remain where she was, and they would do their best to make her appreciate the change from the wild wickedness of the Earl and his friends to the peaceful purity of an unimpeachably correct and virtuous household.

So Nellie stayed. She made herself useful to Mrs. Bridger, did her shopping, mended the house linen. And when the news came that her father was to be released on the following day, she and Mr. Bridger travelled up together, both very silent, as far as Portsmouth.

As he left her, Mr. Bridger, very nervous and uneasy,

said, in a husky voice-

"Whatever I've done was for the best. Remember that. If you make him quarrel with me, you may have worse enemies to settle with."

Nellie said nothing: but indeed she thought that this might be the truth.

Sick with suspense she passed that evening and the early part of the next day. Then, at the time appointed, she went down to the Clarence Pier to meet the Ryde boat that was to bring her father, a free man once more.

She scanned the faces and figures on board eagerly as the boat drew alongside: but her father was not there. Mr. Bridger was leaning over the side of the steamer, with a face full of unmistakable consternation. She could scarcely speak as he ran up the gangway, the first man to land, and whispered to her—

"He's come. He's very ill. Take care what you say to him. Don't mention Lord Alford. He's no longer a man. He's a devil!"

Then he waited beside the girl, who never said a word, until the other passengers were landed, and he could bring the invalid ashore. Trembling, panting, leaning heavily on the arm of his late partner, Alaric Smith was half led,

half carried up the gangway, and brought to meet his daughter.

Was it her father? Was this little bent, lean, yellow sickly old man, with the deeply furrowed face and the close-cut grey hair, really that smart, well set-up, dapper little man whom she had known and loved as her darling father? Nellie could scarcely overcome an inclination to shudder as she kissed him and heard his hoarse whisper—

"Is it my Nellie?"

And her heart melted within her as she told herself that the letter was a forgery; for surely her father was dying, almost before her eyes.

It was with some difficulty that they got him to the pier entrance and lifted him into a fly. Even the excitement of the meeting with his daughter was too much for him: he was laid back gently in a corner of the carriage, where he sat, with his head on his breast, panting and gasping, but unable to speak.

"When he does talk, though," whispered Mr. Bridger to Nellie as they got him out again at the railway-station, straight to which he insisted on being taken, "he'll astonish you!"

you:

"Where are we going to take him?" asked Nellie. "Can he bear a journey?"

"He insists on going to The Firs at once, though it will be a risk."

Nellie told herself, in despair, that he would never survive the long hours in the train. But there was no contradicting or restraining him, so Mr. Bridger said, and when they had given him the brandy he asked for, they lifted him into the train and began the wearisome journey.

The girl was stupefied by the difference between the actual meeting with her father and that to which she had so long looked forward in her dreams. He seemed to have lost touch with the world altogether; and although, as he sat in his corner, in a sort of huddled heap, he stared at his



147

daughter from under his thick grey eyebrows, it seemed to her that he hardly knew who she was, and that his thoughts were not with her, but fixed upon something far away.

She grew frightened, began to wonder whether he was really her father at all, when he made a sign to her to come and sit beside him, and said in a whisper in her ear—

"The wretches thought I should die in there! Fourteen years? They knew I hadn't so much life in me; and just to please that worthless young rascal, the Earl, they gave me what they thought would be a life-sentence. But I'm avenged! He's got my curse on him! I hear he must be bankrupt within a few months! And I thank a just Heaven for it!"

Nellie listened in horror-struck silence. There was such intense ferocity in her father's voice, low though he spoke, that each word he uttered seemed to drain away some of his vital energy. And the fantastic hope she had cherished, of gaining such a hold upon his heart that she would induce him to make restitution, faded rapidly away.

There was a sort of lurid glow in his eyes which seemed to her strange in one so weak; and she wondered whether the long imprisonment had affected his brain.

He seemed scarcely to notice her silence; his own thoughts, his own imaginings, appeared to be all the society he wanted. And Nellie was even thankful to be able, from time to time, to exchange a word or two with Mr. Bridger.

There was something uncanny about their companion, as both of them felt.

They had to change trains at Didcot, but after that the journey was short and without incident. They got into a fly at Bath station, and drove out at once for The Firs. Nellie had her hand-bag with her, and in it she had the keys of the shut-up house.

This part of the journey was the most oppressive of all.

They felt that Mr. Smith was busy with thoughts of his past life in the old city, and neither of his companions dared to interrupt the deep reverie in which he was plunged. Once Nellie had a great shock. The light fell in such a way upon her father's white face that she thought he was dead; but when she bent forward to look at him, he turned upon her sharply, with the words-

"I'm all right."

And she sat back again, with a chill at her heart.

It was getting dark when they reached the gates, and here a fresh difficulty awaited them. Mr. Smith could not walk. So they placed him in one of the Windsor chairs from the lodge, and Mr. Bridger, with the help of Mrs. Barr and Nellie, carried the invalid up to the house, brushing aside the straggling hedges as well as they could.

On the gravelled space before the house a man was standing, quietly waiting. Nellie uttered an exclamation of fear and disgust. The vultures were gathering already; for it was Gustavus Moon.

Alaric Smith's eyes blazed as the young man came forward effusively to greet him.

"You here!" was all he said, in return.

And Moon fell back, snubbed.

Suddenly Alaric Smith drew a long, gasping breath.

"Go to the lodge, Bridger," panted he. "I've left my keys there!"

He tightened his clasp of Nellie's arm as he spoke, so she, in whose possession the keys were, held her peace. No sooner had his late partner disappeared into the mists of the drive than Mr. Smith turned to Moon.

"Go after him," said he, faintly. "Fetch me a glass of water!"

Moon ran off, scared by the sick man's condition. Alaric Smith dismissed Mrs. Barr, and, whispering to his daughter, "Go and open the door. Quick!"

He sent her to the back door with the keys.



Nellie obeyed, sick with some vague dread. She had scarcely unfastened the padlocks when she found her father at her side, upright, vigorous, a changed man.

"Quick!" said he. "Let's get inside and bolt the

rascals out !"



CHAPTER XV

THE change in Alaric Smith was so sudden, so great, that it mounted almost to a transformation. A minute ago, in the presence of his late partner, Joel Bridger, of Gustavus Moon, and Mrs. Barr, he had been a mere nerveless heap, scarcely able to sit up in the chair on which they had carried him up the drive.

Now though, indeed, he still was thin, he still was haggard, while the grey-white hue of his face was unaltered and the peculiar glow of his brown eyes unchanged, he was erect, agile, alert, able to hold his daughter's shoulder with a grip so tight that it hurt her flesh.

She was dismayed, filled with terror and disgust, prepared though she had in some measure been for the fact that his illness was assumed,

"Quick, quick!" he repeated, in her ear. "Those fellows may be on the watch; at any rate, they won't be gone long. Get inside the house."

Even as he spoke, he tore the padlocks open, turned the handle of the door, and pushed her into the stone-flagged passage. Then he followed her in, took the keys from her hands, locked the door behind them, and peremptorily signed to her to go through the open doorway on the left into the servants' hall.

Nellie tottered in obediently, and her father drew forward a chair. They could just see their way about through the barred and dusty windows.

"There," he went on, when she obeyed his gesture and

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sat down, "recover yourself a little. Come, don't look so startled; my letter—didn't you get my letter?" She nodded. "Well, that ought to have prepared you for my being a little further away from death's door than the fools and knaves believed. Sit there quietly, and if any one knocks, take no notice. "Do you hear?"

She bowed her head, trembling from head to foot. He was standing behind her, between the chair and the door. She did not turn round, but sat, dumb and stupefied, too miserable to care what was going forward, until she heard a noise like the creaking of a rusty lock, and turning quickly, found that she was alone in the room.

Rising hastily, she went out into the passage and peeped into the kitchen, which was opposite. No one was there. She looked into the pantry, the scullery, with the same result. Wondering what had become of her father, she returned to the passage and found that the door at the end, which led into the hall of the house, was shut and bolted, or locked on the other side.

At the same moment she became aware of footsteps moving softly about in the hall, and, with a shrinking disgust at the notion of spying upon the movements of her own father, whatever her suspicions of him might be, she drew back hastily, and stumbled along the passage back to the servants' hall.

She had hardly reached it when she heard the same creaking noise as before, and then Alaric Smith himself came quickly along the stone floor and burst again into the room.

Once more she noted a change in him. Instead of the drawn look of anxiety which had previously been on his pinched features, there was now an expression of radiant excitement, almost of happiness on his face, which made it look as if it had suddenly lost the worst of its furrows and wrinkles; at the same time his sickly pallor had given place to a slight flush, and the brilliancy which

she had already remarked in his eyes was more apparent than before.

"Well," said he, not in the irritable tone of a few minutes ago, but with the old gentleness which she remembered in him years before, "and what's the matter with you, child? Aren't you pleased to be back in the old home again, and to have your poor old father with you once more? You look scared, miserable, unlike yourself. Come, don't look so wretched. The bad time's over; your patient won't give you as much trouble as you expected; and "—he came close to her and whispered in her ear—"your patience and my long misery will be paid for—paid for well!"

She shook her head faintly.

"I—I don't want anything," said she, hoarsely, "except to see you quite well again, and once more the good, kind, noble-hearted father I remember. I want everybody to know that you suffered wrongfully, that you were only careless, not guilty, and that, if you lost Lord Alford's property, your only wish is to make amends."

But she had not come to the end of her hurried, scarcely articulate speech before she perceived a great change come over her father. Before she ended he had brought down his fist with a thump upon the table by which he stood, and was shaking with rage.

"Lord Alford! Make amends to Lord Alford! What for? What for? For throwing me into prison for his own mad folly; for making me suffer the torments of the damned for one rash moment? Is that what I have to make amends for? If not, what is it?"

Nellie was appalled. There was no remorse, no repentance, no touch of regret in his voice for anything but his own suffering. Whether he knew himself to be guilty or looked upon himself as almost innocent, it was plain that the notion that he owed any reparation to Lord Alford was the last likely to enter his mind.



153

She stared into his face, stupefied, not knowing what argument to use, or whether to have recourse to simple coaxing.

That, indeed, was the weapon she had meant to use. But the affectionate, wheedling tones of persuasive love and tenderness were out of the question in the face of this savage hardness. Every word she uttered seemed only to inflame his anger the more.

Mechanically, however, she did her best.

"At any rate," she panted out, in a low voice, "the family has incurred a loss through—through us, hasn't it?"

He looked at her with a hard and supercilious stare.

"Incurred a loss, the family? And what about my family? What about my loss? Can you compare the two? Can you pretend that the loss of this fool, who was ready to throw away his own mother's jewels for a single day's vicious pleasure on the turf, can be compared to the long years I've spent, dead to life and love and hope, shut out from every sight and sound I loved? Are you mad, child, that you treat my suffering, what I've gone through, so lightly?"

She shook her head.

"I don't," she said. "I've thought of nothing else all the time you've been away. I've looked forward to seeing you passionately, father. I've had no other hope but to take care of you, and make you forget."

"Make me forget! You can't do that!" said he, with an intense bitterness that shocked her again. "One can wipe it out some other way, perhaps. One can't forget."

Half shuddering, half tender, she crept up to him, and

laid a gentle hand upon his shoulder.

"Don't you think you may be able to forget the worst of it, now you've got back to me, father?" said she.

He pushed her just far enough away from him to be able to look fairly into her face, and said, between his set teeth—

"By Heaven, I mean to! We've gone through the fire, you and I, Nellie. I can guess, child, that you've been made to suffer, too! You look thin, and older than you are. Poor little girl! Poor little girl!"

And just for one moment his voice fell again into the old caressing tones, and he looked as he used to look when she was a child.

Nellie burst into tears. She had held them back before by putting strong constraint upon herself; now the tender look, reminding her suddenly and vividly of the days when life had no cloud, opened the floodgates, and she sobbed most piteously.

Alaric Smith tried to soothe her, but not without impatience. He looked round to the right and left as he patted her on the back and told her to cheer up, that things were all changed now.

"We'll go away, Nellie, somewhere where they don't know us. Smith's a nice little name; we needn't change it. Only instead of being poor Smith and his daughter, we will be rich Smith and his heiress, and we'll have a merry time yet before—before the lights go out!"

On these last words his voice sank again, and there came a look into his eyes which betrayed his knowledge of the fact that, clever as he might be in appearing to be more sickly than he was, his days were numbered.

Nellie stood up straight and stiff.

"But I don't want to be rich. There's nothing I wish for less," cried she energetically. "A cottage, father, that's what I should like—a cottage with a garden, where we——"

"Could rot like our own cabbages!" retorted her father, with a sneer. "You've got to be rich, Nellie, whether you like it or not. You've got—you said so yourself—to make up to me for what I've suffered, and we must have done with poverty as we have done with prison and pain."

"We can't get rich, we can't, we can't!" she cried

155

passionately. "There's no such thing as being rich and honest—for us, at least. And I'll not believe I've been deceived in you; I'll not believe you'd be rich with—with what belonged to others!"

Stammering, gasping, she got out the words which she was burning to say. But it was useless to struggle against that determined will, that steely resolution. In the very eyes of the man she could see the passionate decision to eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow——

She shuddered.

He changed his tone.

"Silly girl!" he said quite quietly, "to rush to such mad conclusions without a question. Haven't you heard? No, of course you haven't, about my invention? I've invented something which will bring us a fortune. That was how I spent those long, dreary hours all to myself. When I can go about and sell the rights in it, we shall make our fortunes, Nellie."

"What is it?" said Nellie, shortly.

"It's a way to keep your own pocket from being picked," replied Alaric Smith, rather curtly. "And there's

money in it, as they say in the City."

Nellie was disconcerted, without being convinced. Putting this and that together in her own mind, her father's air of anxiety on entering the house, his locking her into the one part, while he hunted about in the other, his look of jubilation when he rejoined her, she had no doubt that the surmise of his late partner was correct, that her father had hidden the Countess's diamond in some safe place about the house, and that he had now recovered it and was carrying it on his person.

The subterfuge about the invention, therefore, did not

deceive her for a moment.

"Can't you explain more clearly than that?" persisted she.

"No," said he, shortly. "I should have thought the thing

would explain itself. We'll make money, and we'll keep it, Nellie; and the rogues who thought they knew how to do us out of what is lawfully ours—bought and paid for; paid for, I say," repeated he with emphasis—"have been let in. Ha! ha!"

And he burst out into a triumphant laugh which grated on her ear.

She knew very well what he meant; knew that he saw through the tender solicitude of Bridger and Moon, and that he was rejoicing in their discomfiture. She, however, felt no great satisfaction in contemplating what the effect of such a disappointment as theirs might be upon two greedy and unscrupulous men.

In the midst of her father's laughter, however, there came a sudden change in him, which alarmed and puzzled her. Whether he too had been struck with certain difficulties presented by his position, or whether he was really beginning to feel the effects of the frightful excitement under which he had been labouring, certain it is that he frightened her by reeling into a chair, and by drawing deep breaths which betrayed that he was on the point of some sort of fit or paroxysm.

"Oh, you're ill! What is it? What can I do?" said she, hastening to his side and unbuttoning the coat which was fastened over his chest.

But he shook his head, and signed with his hand to her to go away.

"A little—tired—faint," gasped he. "That's all!"

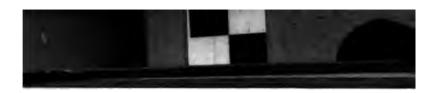
Nellie ran towards the door.

"I'll get you some water," said she. "It's only just outside."

But ill as he was, he stopped her by an imperious gesture.

"Outside—the—house?" inquired he, hoarsely.

"Yes, in the yard."
"Then stay here."



157

She hesitated. To her, delay seemed almost murderous, for she saw the great beads coming out on his forehead, and knew that he was in dire need. Should she defy his wishes, and go out in spite of him and call in help, whether that of Mrs. Barr or one of the men she hardly cared?

But even at that moment her father understood, and once more, angrily, peremptorily, he signed to her to stay.

At the same moment there came to their ears, with startling suddenness, a loud and violent knocking at the door.



WHEN Alaric Smith bade his old partner, Bridger, go to the lodge to fetch his keys, the latter went obediently down the drive without, for the moment, entertaining any doubt on the subject of his errand.

Nellie had not taken him into her confidence in the matter of the letter she had received from her father, and he therefore had no doubt whatever as to the genuineness of the released convict's illness.

He was much perplexed by the attitude of fierce antagonism towards Lord Alford which Smith took up, and exercised in his mind as to the effect it would have upon him when he learned, as learn he must, of the friendly relations which had subsisted between Nellie and the household at Heynes Hall.

Would he relax in his energetic antagonism when he found out the kindness which had been shown to his daughter by Lord Alford and his aunt? Or would he look upon those relations as a fresh cause of offence?

Joel Bridger was not disinterested in these reflections. He was wondering whether he would find it to his own advantage to fan the flame of Smith's anger or to try to quench it. And he could not decide which course would be the more likely to bring profit to himself. The one thing he ardently desired was to bring about a marriage between his own son and Nellie, who would, he shrewdly suspected, inherit something worth having when her father died. By what means was this marriage to be brought about?

159

The poor man had another source of anxiety. Who was this fellow Moon who had thrust himself so inopportunely in the way again? What was he doing at The Firs? How had he got hold of those suspicions of Joel Bridger himself which had led him to attack him so unwarrantably that afternoon when Nellie had been so unreasonably curious?

Joel Bridger had shown great forbearance in refraining from open denunciation of this fellow, when he was so suddenly brought face to face with him at Heynes Hall. Still, he did not feel sure that his magnanimity was properly appreciated by Moon, who had taken no notice of him when, five minutes ago, they met at the door of The Firs.

Full of these anxious thoughts, Mr. Bridger reached the lodge. There was no one inside, and he had to search as well as he could without assistance. All his trouble was vain, however, and he was getting purple in the face in a strenuous endeavour to peep into obscure corners of the floor with the aid of matches, when the door burst open and Gustavus Moon came in.

Old Bridger rose up from his knees as if he had been shot. It was an undignified thing to be discovered on "all fours" peering under tables and coal-scuttles, and he explained his position with some irritation.

"And what have you come for?" he added aggressively, believing that Moon had been sent, or had come of his own

accord, as a spy upon himself.

The younger man was standing in the doorway with his feet crossed, his hands in his pockets, and a cynical smile on his face, whistling softly to himself.

"Me? Oh, I was sent to fetch a glass of water. The

old fox has had us both!"

"What?" screamed Joel Bridger, forgetting to be pompous and bland, as he stared into the face of the other man with incredulous eyes.

Moon nodded.

"He's had us both," he repeated promptly. "Look here, if you doubt it, out of the window. There's the old woman sent puffing down the drive after us. Now do you see the idea?"

"No, I don't," said Bridger, bluntly and ferociously. "If this Smith is ungrateful enough, after all I've done for him, and all the kindness I've shown his daughter, to lock me out of his house, as if I were a thief, I'll—"

"Keep your hair on, old chap!" said Moon, smiling softly, and still keeping his hands in his pockets. "Even if he does get inside the house, he can't very well get out

again without having us at his heels, can he?"

Mr. Bridger did not at all like this flippant manner of speech. It hurt his dignity to be spoken to so familiarly, especially as the man who ventured upon this style of address was the same who had spoken even more openly on a previous occasion. "Let bygones be bygones" was his motto, and he cared for no reminder of that unfortunate scuffle in the shut-up house.

"And, pray, who are you?" he said stiffly, after a moment's pause. "And what knowledge have you of

Mr. Smith's affairs?"

"Oh, I take a philanthropic interest in him," replied Moon, lightly. "I'm a member of the Discharged Prisoners' Aid Society, and——"

"Psha!" said Mr. Bridger, indignantly, as he bounced out of the cottage, and began to plough his way through the mud of the drive.

Mrs. Barr met him and smiled.

"Mr. Smith's found his keys," she explained, with a nod. "Leastways, sir, I think he'd forgotten as Miss Nellie had them all the time. He's that peppery, sir, now he's come back. But there, I suppose we mustn't be surprised; for what he's gone through would make a change in any of us! Has the other gentleman brought the water, sir?"



161

Gustavus Moon was sauntering up the drive behind

Bridger.

"I didn't like to disturb your lovely little house by poking about among the crockery," he said, with the jaunty manner that always won the good will of old ladies for the scamp. "And I dare say his daughter has got him some water by this time."

Mrs. Barr looked rather shocked at this callous speech, but she mumbled an acquiescent word, curtseyed to the gentlemen, and went to her cottage, not without a backward peep at them as they walked up the drive together, deep in earnest conversation.

"Why did you come away if you knew his errand was

only an excuse?" said Mr. Bridger.

"Because I was taken in by the old sweep, just as you were," replied Moon. "He did look so precious ill that I forgot what I knew quite well—and that is that he's shamming."

"Shamming!"

"'M. He told me himself, when I visited him in prison, that he meant to get out by that means. But, by Jove! when I saw him to-day I thought he must really be dying."

"Then, if he's not dying, he's perpetrated a fraud!" said

Mr. Bridger, indignantly.

Moon chuckled and looked at him askance.

"That's good, said he. That's really good, that is. Especially from you."

"Sir, what do you mean by 'especially from me'?"

"There, there," said Moon, waving his hand in a conciliatory manner, "I meant nothing, nothing at all. Except just this. If this fellow, this ex-convict, who's managed to elude us getting into the house, should elude us in getting out again, where do we come in, eh?"

"Where do we come in? By the door, I suppose, sir," retorted Mr. Bridger, who disliked this slangy style of talk

very much.



"Ah! But it won't be much use our going in by the door if he's gone and taken the diamond with him?"

Joel Bridger's nerve and his hypocrisy failed him altogether. He turned all colours, and there in the middle of the drive, with a yew branch sweeping each shoulder, he stopped short and considered.

He had at first a mind to ask, "What diamond?" But fear of a rude burst of derisive laughter from this ribald fellow restrained him. After a little hesitation, he said—

"I confess to having had my suspicions about this. And if I could only have found out that he had really hidden the stone, I should have rejoiced in making restitution to the Cannington family."

"Restitution be d——d," replied Moon, simply. "However, we won't quarrel about that. I dare say what you mean by 'restitution' and what I mean by something else are pretty much the same thing."

"Sir, do you insinuate----?"

"Not a bit of it, old chap. All I meant to suggest was that, as we both suspect that he's not acting on the square, while at the same time we both know the purity of our own intentions—purity of our own intentions. That's all right, eh?" And with a return of the regrettable ribaldry which Mr. Bridger deprecated, he dug that excellent man in the ribs. "What I suggest is that, as he's about as artful as they make 'em, you and I should join forces and make him—disgorge, eh?"

Mr. Bridger hesitated. Loathsome as this flippant person was, it seemed to be difficult to escape him, impossible to hope to outwit him. On the other hand, he was afraid of being made a catspaw himself.

"You seem to be great friends with Miss Smith," he said stiffly. "You mean to marry her, I suppose?"

Moon shrugged his shoulders.

"The girl's so taken up with Lord Alford," said he, "that I don't suppose she'll look at any one else!"

163

Mr. Bridger looked much shocked.
"With Lord Alford! A married man!"

"Oh, I meant no harm. Don't go and get me into a row with the old gentleman by repeating that. All I meant was that my chances are small of doing myself any good that way, or perhaps you wouldn't find me so friendly. But look here. If you were to be lucky, and were to make, say, a haul, what could you do by yourself? You'd want some one to help you realize, eh? There's always more work than one man can undertake in an affair of this kind." Mr. Bridger did not like this talk, and again showed signs of restiveness. So Moon changed his tone a little—"What I suggest is, that if you and I were to make a discovery, which we could scarcely do alone, it might pan out well for both of us."

"Certainly, if we were to make restitution," said Mr. Bridger, "we should not go without a suitable and hand-some reward."

"Ay, it would have to be a handsome one," assented Moon. "Well, what say you to watching our friend, taking care of him, looking after him, and generally seeing to things, turn and turn about?"

"I say he wouldn't put up with it," said Bridger.

"Well, he might have to. And depend upon it, if we kept close enough watch, we should find out something. There's one thing a man can't do, when he's got such a secret as that on his mind, and that is—keep it to himself. Either he betrays himself by a word or a look, or he lets out more than that when he's raving. The moment must come when he can keep it to himself no longer. Why, how should I know anything about it, but for that blessed need of babbling about one's secrets to some one? Unluckily he didn't let out quite enough, but we must trust to luck to finding out the rest. Come on. Buck up. They'll be in the house by this time, and—he'll have found something, and probably have it about him by now."

And Moon suddenly bent forward, and looked into his companion's face with such an ugly grin that Mr. Bridger felt doubly regretful that fate should have forced him into such questionable company.

"I—I can't allow any violence!" he said nerveusly, as he drew back a little from close contact with Mr. Moon.

"Violence! Of course not. All we want to do is to prevent his getting away with the proceeds of his stupendous theft, realizing, and living happily ever after on his ill-gotten gains, isn't it?"

"It certainly ought to be prevented, if possible," said Mr. Bridger. "That is the one feeling I have had strongly from the beginning, that it is iniquitous that this man, if he really did commit the robbery, should be able to profit by it

after all."

"Much better that we should!" assented Moon.

Mr. Bridger frowned.

"I tell you," said he, "the one thing in my mind is restitution."

"Exactly. And if we can't get hold of the diamond, what I say is, that we ought to prevent his using it."

"Supposing," suggested Mr. Bridger, as they turned into the broad gravelled space before the house itself, "that it shouldn't be on the premises after all."

Moon shrugged his shoulders.

"Everything points to its being there," he said. "His three ideas were always: To get back to the house; to rejoin his daughter; and to be rich. I took it that all three notions were part of one central plan."

They stared at the empty Windsor chair in which they had carried Alaric Smith up the drive. Mr. Bridger would have hurried round to the back door, by which, during the owner's long absence, the house had been entered, the front door having remained unopened by his orders.

But Moon laid a restraining hand upon his arm.



165

"Wait," said he. "We don't want to get in until he's unearthed what he's hidden, do we?"

Mr. Bridger moved uneasily. He did not like this appearance of plotting; he preferred to keep a decent pretence of noble motives over his anxiety to possess himself of the treasure. Still, there was no denying the shrewdness of this suggestion. Moon went on—

"Depend upon it, he'll go straight for it, wherever it is. However safe he may have thought it, he'll not rest till he's

made sure it's not been touched."

"If we wait too long," said Joel Bridger after a pause, "he'll have hidden it again, and we shall be as far off as ever."

Moon took the hint, stepped lightly over the grass-grown stones of the courtyard, and thundered at the door.

But if he thought that his urgency would have the effect of hurrying those within, he was mistaken. The door creaked and groaned, but no one opened it, though he could hear a soft footfall on the inner side.

"They don't mean to open it. They've locked us out," he said excitedly to the lawyer, who came up at that moment, pale and anxious.

"And here we shall have to wait, I suppose, till they've made all safe again!" said Bridger with sullen anger.

This suggestion induced Moon to make another onslaught upon the door, more terrific than the first, and a few moments later they heard rapid footsteps, and Nellie, pale and frightened, unbolted it hastily and threw it open.

"Oh, go for Mrs. Barr, please go for Mrs. Barr!" said

she earnestly. "My father's very ill, very ill indeed."

But both men were too eagerly intent upon their own object to heed her bequest.

"Better let us see what we can do for him, my dear," said Mr. Bridger, as he and Moon pressed forward past her into the house.



CHAPTER XVII

DISGUSTED as she was at their interested eagerness, Nellie was thankful that Joel Bridger and Gustavus Moon had come, for she felt sure that her father, however much he might have succeeded in exaggerating the symptoms of his illness, was really in a serious condition.

"And where is he? Where is my poor old friend?" asked Mr. Bridger, as soon as he got inside the house.

"In the drawing-room," said Nellie.

And like a flash of lightning both men disappeared in the direction indicated.

Nellie followed as quickly as she could.

It was a gruesome sight that met their eyes when they opened the door of the big, square drawing-room. Nellie had put back the shutters of the great window that overlooked the lawn and flower-garden at the side of the house. Dusk was drawing on, and a mist was already hanging over the tangle of flower and weed, shrub and trees, and coming in at the open window in little filmy clouds.

The room looked bare and cold. Great stains of green damp were on the white and gold walls, and a fungus was throwing up its long grey fingers from behind the skirting boards.

Over everything there was a sense of decay, and the grey mist scarcely increased the mouldy sensation of cold neglect that seized one by the throat on entering.

Weirdest sight of all, Alaric Smith, lying back, a huddled

167 even

heap, in a low wicker chair that threatened to give way even under his spare form, sat close to the window, staring out into the tangle below him with his teeth close set, and his right hand, clenched and trembling, pressed close against his chin.

He stared when they came in, and with one more hasty glance at the garden, moved round to face his visitors.

"Oh," he said, "back again, are you? I thought you

had both gone home."

"Why surely," said Mr. Bridger, in his fullest, heartiest tones, "you might have known better than to suppose that I, your old friend and partner, would have run away without making sure you were comfortable!"

"Ah! Thanks!" said Mr. Smith, dryly. "And you, Moon, why have you stayed? You're not such an old

friend, now, are you?"

"I'm a very good one, I hope," said the young man, growing pink under the sneer. "At least, you used to say so—once!"

The grey-faced man in the chair laughed, in the same dry way.

"Yes, so I did, so I did," said he. "We were great

pals in the old days, weren't we?"

"I don't think it's wise for you to be sitting at the open window in this fog," broke in Moon, hurriedly changing

the subject. "Let me shut it."

"The room's cold and damp enough as it is," chimed in Joel Bridger. "Now that you're satisfied that all's right here, won't you be persuaded to come back home with me, with us, and let Mrs. Bridger help Nellie to nurse you till you feel strong again?"

Moon kept his eyes fixed steadily and knowingly upon the lawyer during this speech, but Mr. Bridger, mellow and

bland, would not see him.

Alaric Smith shook his head.

"No, I'll stay here," he said quietly. "And Nellie

shall set up housekeeping. We shall do very well. All I want is—rest, and peace."

The words, quietly as they were said, contained such a strong hint that there was a moment's disconcerted silence on the part of the solicitous visitors. Nellie seized this apparently favourable opportunity to address them in a

coaxing tone.

"Would you be kind enough," she said gently, addressing chiefly Mr. Bridger, but with an occasional glance that took in his companion, "to call at the lodge as you go out, and ask Mrs. Barr to come up and help me? I want a lot of things got in, and fires lighted——"

"Let me light the fires for you," said Moon eagerly.

"I can do anything of that sort, I assure you."

"And if you'll run out into the village to buy what you want," added Mr. Bridger, promptly, "I'll undertake to look after your father till you come back."

Nellie said nothing. The two men exchanged a sidelong look, and in the silence there came a slight sound, something like a derisive, smothered chuckle from the invalid in the chair.

Then Nellie spoke, gently but with decision.

"I can't leave him," she said, "for a moment. If you won't go, I must wait, that's all. Mrs. Barr is sure to come

up presently, to see if we want any help."

"And why not use ours in the mean time?" said Moon, gallantly. "This room is much too cold for an invalid. If your father would let us take him into one of the rooms on the upper floor, and if your friend Mrs. Barr would make up a bed there, we could make him comfortable for the night before going away."

As he spoke, he glanced first at Bridger, and then at Alaric Smith, who was busily buttoning up his coat. This very suggestive action attracted the keen attention of both the other men, whose greedy eyes watched every movement, convinced that within that coat, in some pocket, or maybe



169

stowed away carefully in the lining, was the jewel of which they had heard so much.

"I'm very well where I am," said the invalid, rather

testily. "I can't think why you won't believe me."

Even as he spoke, however, he shivered, and every one knew better than to suppose that any but a very strong motive would have kept a man in such a state of health in such cheerless surroundings. The dusk was deepening every moment; the straggling bushes in their late spring foliage shut out part of the fading light; each member of the little party felt as if clammy fingers had been laid upon them as they sat or stood and shivered in the forlorn-looking room, with its window-curtains clinging like wet rags to the wall, and the mouldy smell of decay stronger than ever now that the window was closed.

It was a relief to the general tension when footsteps were heard in the hall outside, and Nellie, running to the door, opened it and found Mrs. Barr in the hall.

"Oh, Miss Nellie," she said, in an excited whisper, begging your pardon for troubling you, but I thought as how I'd better come and see if there was anything as I could do for you."

The girl threw her arms round the good woman's

shoulders, and almost hugged her.

"Come," she whispered, "you good old thing, come and bring us some lights and fires, to warm up this horrible mausoleum. My father insists on staying here, and so it seems do these other two. No; don't call out, don't look astonished; just help!"

"Oh, miss, for sure you don't think of sleeping here! Why, the fires we light will only bring the damp out of the walls, and to-morrow morning you'll all be a-creaking and a-crawling with rheumatics!" objected the dame.

"It can't be helped," said Nellie, desperately. "I suppose the upstairs rooms are not so bad as this one?"

"No, miss. Some of them's pretty right, I dare say.

But the drawing-room do look awful bad, by what I can see!"

And Mrs. Barr, who was standing by the open door, screwed her head round to peep at the stained walls. The next moment she started back in alarm, for Mr. Smith himself came out into the hall with unexpected briskness.

"I'll come upstairs with you," he said, "and we'll decide upon the rooms to be used."

"Are we to prepare rooms for the other gentlemen, sir?" asked Mrs. Barr.

"No," said Mr. Smith, dryly. "I haven't invited them to stay, and I don't know why they're staying. But if they remain here the night, they must manage as they can. There's a great deal too much fuss about me. I'm not very strong, but I'm not the sickly creature they make out. If they want to watch over me, let them show their solicitude by roughing it."

Mrs. Barr looked surprised at this outburst, which was delivered in a dry, hard, almost snarling tone.

Five minutes later, Alaric Smith had selected a bedroom for himself, one for his daughter with the door immediately opposite to his, and without waiting for any elaborate preparations to be made, he simply took from Mrs. Barr the candle she was carrying, bade Nellie good night, went into his room, and locked himself in for the night.

Nellie and Mrs. Barr remained outside the door in the dark, stupefied by these proceedings.

"He do be growed very odd in his ways, miss!" remarked Mrs. Barr, as they went quietly downstairs together.

Nellie acquiesced with a sinking heart. She was puzzled by her father's conduct, disgusted by that of the other two men. She was, moreover, somewhat apprehensive as to the possible perils of a night to be spent in the same house with them.

171

In the mean time the two kind friends in the drawingroom were a good deal put out by this unceremonious and ungrateful treatment. Mr. Bridger, who was getting alarmed at Moon's open cynicism, and who began to consider his society dangerous, was for beating a retreat, and he invited the younger man to return home with him and to stay the night at his house in Bath.

But Moon declined to leave The Firs yet.

"If we lose sight of him now, the chances are we shall lost sight of him altogether," he said. "You can see he is afraid of us. Why should he be, if his conscience is clear? If he hasn't unearthed the big stone he stole and hidden it about him ready for flight, why should he run away the moment he's left alone with us?"

Even as he spoke they heard the locking of a door upstairs, and, the drawing-room door being ajar, they heard the comments of Nellie and Mrs. Barr as these two came downstairs.

Moon drew Bridger back into the room, and gently shut the door.

"He's locked himself into his room," said he. "Now

do you want convincing that I'm right?"

"Well, if so, we can do nothing. Let us get away," said Bridger, who disliked these whispered conferences in the gloom, this button-holing in dusky corners, and who preferred to "conspire all by himself."

Moon laughed.

"Go, if you like," said he. "For my part, I'd rather suffer any inconvenience than desert my poor friend when he's ill."

"But there's nothing he wants more than to be deserted," protested Mr. Bridger.

"So much the more reason for us to look after him. His mind is not quite right, any more than his body."

Joel Bridger sighed. He was old enough to like his little

comforts, his fireside and a well-cooked dinner. The prospect of spending a night sitting up in a damp room, without hope of thanks or reward, was dismal indeed. But as Moon was determined to stay, he reluctantly made up his mind to do the same. And they therefore got Mrs. Barr to light a fire in the drawing-room, which had the immediate result of filling the room with smoke, and to send down into the village for something to eat and a bottle of whisky.

Protesting all the while that they were too anxious to leave the house until they were assured that his journey had done Alaric Smith no harm, they then made as merry as they could over their impromptu repast, and prepared to

get what sleep they could where they were.

The drawing-room was just under Mr. Smith's bedroom,

and they left the door open.

There was enough of the born adventurer about Gustavus Moon for him to be able to rough it with ease. He therefore soon fell asleep with his body on one chair and his feet in another, and he was snoring peacefully when Bridger, who could not close his eyes in these uncomfortable circumstances, was roused to attention by the unlocking of the door of the room above.

He got up from his chair, went to the door, and listened. A minute later he saw a light through the crack, and waiting till it had disappeared, he peeped out, and saw Alaric Smith going down the passage that led out of the hall to the study.

Smith unlocked the door of the study, and disappeared. Joel Bridger went after him, and, when he heard Smith open one of the study windows and get outside, he waited a few moments and followed.

There was just enough moonlight for him to be able to see, when he got to the open window, the figure of his late partner in the garden below, struggling through the tangle of bush and weed and making his way slowly towards the plantation on the other side of the little lawn.



173

He had put out his candle and left it behind him in the study, and the only thing which he carried in his hand was a short-handled brass coal-shovel.

Joel Bridger's heart leapt to his mouth. Which was he going to do: to bury something, or to dig something up?

CHAPTER XVIII

THE lawyer was congratulating himself on having made this discovery in the absence of the objectionable Gustavus Moon, and was watching with eager eyes the progress of Alaric Shith through the tangled garden, when he felt some one's breath upon his neck, and turning with a smothered cry, saw that he had rejoiced too soon.

Moon, sleepy, but not subdued, was on his track.

"What's up?" he inquired in Bridger's ear.

The lawyer made a hasty gesture demanding silence, and reluctantly pointed out the stealthy figure moving slowly towards the plantation.

"What! Is he getting away?" asked Moon.

Bridger shook his head.

"I don' think so. He's got-a shovel."

Moon rubbed his hands softly.

"Good!" said he. "That means business."

Bridger was not so hopeful.

"He's giving a lot of trouble," he said testily. "We don't know now whether he's hunting for something, or hiding it."

"Hiding it again, I should say," said Moon, with decision.
"There's no doubt he had it about him last night. Depend upon it, a man who has left something of great value hidden for seven years loses not a moment in finding out that it's safe. If he hadn't assured himself of that even before we got into the house, he wouldn't have been able to sit still."

175

This conjecture showed such exceeding shrewdness that Mr. Bridger was fain to be convinced.

"Shall we follow him?" said he, dubiously.

"Not for the world. He isn't likely to go far. Better do things quietly, at this stage, at any rate. Let us see what he's going to do; you can see him moving about among the bushes still. The tangle's too bad for him to get more than a few yards in any direction without such a crash as must show where he is."

From the darkness in the room they were able to watch at their ease, and, as Moon said, they could follow the progress of Alaric Smith without much difficulty as he struggled through the garden, over the ruined and untidy lawn grown up with brambles and weeds, and into the plantation beyond.

Here he paused, and appeared to be searching for some-

thing on the ground.

"He's looking for the place," suggested Moon, under his breath.

After a pause Smith went further into the plantation, and paused again. This he did several times, while the two watchers held their breath, and strained their eyes to mark the exact spot where the discovery they expected would be made.

But it was not until the whole plantation had been searched from end to end that the searcher appeared to have at last found that of which he was in search. On the edge of the plantation furthest from where the watchers stood he lingered for a long time, so long, indeed, that they began to grow suspicious and anxious, and to be ready to leap out into the garden and investigate on their own account. Both men were hanging out of the window, straining their eyes and ears, when, after a long pause during which they had been able to make out nothing as to the movements of the quarry, they perceived Smith making straight for the house at a great rate, forcing his way through bush and bramble and turning neither to the right nor to the left.

"He's found it !"-" He's buried it !"

Moon and Bridger uttered these ejaculations at the same moment, and then, mortified at their own indiscretion, they both retreated helter-skelter for the door, darted down the passage and shut themselves into the drawing-room, panting and excited, and ready to lay the blame of their rashness upon each other.

Had Smith heard—had he seen them? On the whole, after the first moment of panic, they were inclined to think not.

But Nellie, who had been roused from sleep by the noise made by the two men as they hurried back, listened at her door, heard her father come slowly up the stairs and along the corridor, and lock himself into his own room again. And then, listening still, wondering what had happened and whether he was ill, she was on the point of knocking at his door to ask if he wanted any assistance, when she checked herself on hearing an extraordinary sound, a sound which made her ask herself whether he was really quite sane.

He was evidently almost choking in an attempt to smother a fit of uncontrollable laughter.

She went noiselessly back to her own room and shut herself in, her heart full of misgiving. She began to realize that the father who had come back to her, whether mad or sane, was not the parent she remembered; every hour, indeed, seemed to widen the gulf there was between them, and to make her even thankful for the presence of the two greedy, interested creatures who, whatever their private motives might be, did indeed help to ease the strain of the situation.

On the following morning, however, she found that there was too much to do for any feeling of uncomfortable constraint to be possible. Mrs. Barr was there early, getting ready the dining-room for breakfast. When Joel Bridger and his companion made their appearance, both were suffering from cold, were red of eye and hoarse of voice, and wore



177

an uneasy air of having had a bad night's rest if they had had any.

The invalid, on the other hand, came down smiling and almost brisk, after a cold bath and a shave; and it was evident that he derived some secret enjoyment from the contemplation of the heavy-eyed and snuffling guests whose solicitude he had rewarded so stingily.

After breakfast, during which not one word was said, either by Mr. Smith or the others, about his future arrangements, there was an awkward moment. Joel Bridger had to go to his office, and he wanted to take Moon with him. It almost seemed as if he would rather have let Alaric Smith make off with the diamond than suffer his co-plotter, Moon, to become possessed of it.

Moon, however, airily persisted that he must stay. He could not, he said, leave his friends to shift for themselves when he might be of use.

He and Bridger were in the hall, where, the front door having been thrown open for the first time in seven years, a flood of light was pouring in, and Mrs. Barr, with a pail of water and a scrubbing brush, was forcing them to skip about uncomfortably while they conversed.

Then Alaric Smith came out of the dining-room.

"Oh, by the way, Bridger, can you lend me some money?" said he. "I've only got a couple of sovereigns, and I can't get any more till I can raise some on an invention of mine, which I believe is a dead sure thing."

A sort of thrill ran through the other two men, who guessed what the "invention" was. Mr. Bridger hesitated, and Smith said at once—

"You can't do it? Oh, well, never mind! I know where I can—"

The lawyer broke in at once-

"I can do it, of course. How much do you want?"

"Let me have a hundred to go on with."

"All right. I'll bring it to you, or send Bram with it to-night."

"Thanks, thanks. And now, I suppose, you must both

be off."

"I can stay, Mr. Smith. I am entirely at your disposal. Make use of me in any way you please. I'll take down pictures, run errands, work in the garden, do anything in the world to help you, and "—Moon gave the girl an arch smile—" Miss Nellie."

Mr. Smith accepted the offer at once.

"If you'll superintend the doing up of the garden," he said, "I shall be awfully obliged to you. I'm going to engage a couple of men to work in it, but I want them kept at it, looked after, made just to pull up the weeds in the kitchen garden, to lop the trees in the orchard, and mow the lawn, and not to go fiddling about in the plantation and treading down the young trees."

Moon and the lawyer exchanged a stealthy look. Here, indeed, was confirmation of their discovery of the night before. Alaric Smith did not want any work done in the plantation. Obviously, there could be but one reason for

this.

Bridger found a chance of another few words with Moon.

"What do you think of it all?" he said, as they stood together on the gravelled space in front of the house.

"Think! Why, that we're on the high-road," said the younger man, enthusiastically.

Bridger stared at him blankly.

"Well, I don't," he muttered, as he went off.

And Moon was not quite so enthusiastic at the close of the day, when, after a long and arduous day's work with the men in the garden, during which he had not confined himself to looking on, he met Bridger, who was coming up the drive, having come out from Bath in a cab.



179

"Nothing found, I suppose?" said the lawyer, with almost cynical despondency.

Moon was flushed, tired, and savage.

"The old fool had ploughed up every inch of that blessed plantation with his confounded footling coal-scoop!" said he, hotly. "Every foot of the ground had been turned up and trodden down. He must have bounded and floundered and scraped and scuttled about like a prize pig in a passion!"

His simile was not apt, but his manner was forceful,

and Mr. Bridger was impressed.

"I wonder if he is such a fool!" he remarked gloomily.

"Oh, I don't know, and I don't care!" said Moon, in disgust; "but you may take the next turn at this digging yourself!"

As they walked up the drive in silence, they saw, sitting in the front window of the drawing-room, basking in the last rays of a pleasant May afternoon, Alaric Smith, leaning back comfortably in a wicker chair, with his feet on a high stool, and a good cigar between his fingers, leisurely puffing out smoke-clouds, and looking peaceful, serene, and happy as a patriarch at play.

And the contrast between this prosperous and unrepentant vice and their own disappointed and snuffling virtue, struck both the visitors and filled them with rage.

Mr. Smith was very grateful, however, to the one for his loan and to the other for his toil. And as he had managed to provide an excellent dinner, by sending in a special messenger to one of the best hotels in Bath, there reigned a pleasant harmony at the repast, which was served in the big dining-room, with brilliant accompaniment of flowers and wax candles and excellent wine.

"You mean to make up for lost time, eh, Smith?" suggested Joel Bridger, without much tact, when special favour had been shown to a raised pie. "This is a dinner fit for a king."

"I've never had a better at Lord Alford's," added Gustavus Moon, with equal inopportuneness.

Mr. Smith frowned.

"There'll be many a worse eaten by that scoundrel in the time to come, I hope," he said shortly.

And there was an awkward pause. Nellie, in particular, felt very guilty. So far, she had neither had the opportunity nor the wish to tell her father of the kindness she had received from the Earl and his aunt, or of her visit to Heynes Hall. The whole day had been passed by her in superintending the rapid progress made in setting the house in order, while Alaric Smith had spent it in a state of profound silence, lying back in his chair by the window watching the clearing up of the garden, without manifesting any desire either to converse or to be entertained.

Now, his reception of the mention of the Earl's name filled her with consternation. What would he say when he heard of her adventures? While she felt that her story ought to soften him towards the Cannington family, she shrewdly suspected that the process of hardening which her father's nature had undergone during the past ten years made it more likely that he would impute evil motives than good ones to those who had shown themselves her friends.

Mr. Bridger changed the subject.

"I suppose you mean to go away somewhere while this house is done up, don't you?" he asked, with a glance at the stains of damp on the walls.

"I suppose I shall have to, by-and-by," answered Alaric Smith, leaning back in his chair with an air of easy enjoyment which belied his character of hopeless invalid. "The invention which I perfected during those many long hours I had to spare," he went on grimly, "will certainly bring in money, and I may agree to have something to do with the working of it. In the meantime, however, I propose to stay here, and to enjoy a little rest and change in the society of my friends."

191

There was another silence. He seemed perfectly satisfied with the situation; but Joel Bridger, who was supplying the funds for this pleasant picnic among the ruins, and Moon, who was on thorns till he could discover the whereabouts of the big diamond, could not take matters so easily.

They exchanged a rather doleful glance, and wondered

how long this unsatisfactory state of things would last.

"In the mean time," went on Smith slowly, stretching out his hand for an olive, "the only journey I have to make is one to complete the sale of my invention."

Bridger and Moon, so to speak, pricked up their ears. What could be clearer than that for "invention" they should understand "diamond"? He meant to leave The Firs with the object of disposing of the jewel, and then to dole out to them a few miserable pounds by way of payment for their services, while he realized enough himself to live upon luxuriously and to dower his daughter.

Although a stone of such value is not to be disposed of to the first-comer, they knew better than to suppose that Alaric Smith, cunning as he had proved himself to be, had failed to arrange during those seven years the plan upon which he meant to act to get the best possible value for his stolen capital.

Before either of his hearers could ask any more questions, Alaric Smith, whose ears were keener than those of any one else—a result probably of the many hours he had spent in solitude—raised his head and listened.

"Whose voice is that?" he asked sharply.

They had heard no voice. He insisted, however, on the opening of the door, and Nellie uttered an exclamation when she heard the gentle, precise tones of Lady Alicia Cannington at the hall door.

The next moment Mrs. Barr came in, and announced, with a sort of scared look on her face, that Lady Alicia had come to inquire after Mr. Smith's health, and wished to know if she could see him.

"Oh no, no!" cried Nellie, shocked, under her breath. But Alaric Smith rose up gravely.

"I will see Lady Alicia," he said.
A silence of horror reigned over the rest as he left the room. What, oh, what, would he say to her? What would she say to him?



CHAPTER XIX

Nor one of the three persons left in the dining-room when Alaric Smith went out to meet his unexpected guest, entertained for a moment the idea that Lady Alicia had come to visit the released convict out of Christian charity.

To Joel Bridger and Gustavus Moon, the quiet old lady, in the dowdy black bonnet and the lace-trimmed black dolman, was just another rival for the possession of the diamond which they felt was justly theirs and theirs alone.

To Nellie the gentle old lady was not only an artful intriguer, but she might be the means of bringing about a terrible scene of anger and recrimination on the part of the man who had brooded over his punishment until he looked upon it, not as the just reward for his own deeds, but as an act of vindictive cruelty on the part of the family he had robbed.

What would happen when the two came face to face she did not know. She half rose from her chair when her father went out, but he made an imperious gesture with his hand, bidding her be seated, so that she dared not follow him.

The two men looked gloomily at each other and sipped their wine without a word. They could not discuss the matter before Nellie, whose anxious face showed plainly that her own cares were not less weighty than theirs.

What was happening in the adjoining room? Instinctively they listened for the sound of raised voices, of

tones of indignation, of expostulation. But not so much as a murmur reached their ears.

Alaric Smith, walking slowly and with bent head, supporting himself upon two walking-sticks and trembling slightly, entered the drawing-room, shut the door, and bowed stiffly and with evident difficulty to his visitor. But if he was dignified and reserved, the lady was not. Advancing towards him with her hands outstretched, she insisted upon his offering her his right hand, which she held for a moment in hers as she said gently—

"We must all forgive and forget, must we not, dear Mr.

Smith ?"

For a moment he hesitated, in the mean time inviting her, by a gesture, to be seated. Still holding his hand she drew him gently towards one of the mouldy sofas, and said—

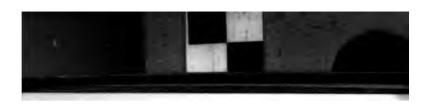
"You are ill, I see, but not so ill, I hope, that you may not look forward to getting quite, quite well again?"

By that time they were seated, side by side, in the friendliest manner, on the damp couch, and Lady Alicia was able to see, by the light of two sconces filled with candles which glimmered from the walls, that her host's face was deeply lined, and that he looked many years older than his age.

He sighed and shook his head. He was still dignified, still reserved, but he was courteous too. He had seen Lady Alicia before, but had never spoken to her; her action, therefore, was all the more gracious, the more friendly, and her tact in leaving it open to question on which side the forgiveness was to be, made it easy to bridge over preliminaries and to come to an understanding.

"I am broken, very much broken," said he. "Consumption and asthma together make a combination before which the stoutest might well go down."

"Dear, dear!" said the lady sympathetically. "And you dared the risk of coming straight back to this house,



185

which had been shut up for so long! It was very, very unwise."

And she shook her head in the kindest, gentlest reproof.
"What could I do? It's the only spot on earth where I can feel that I am at home!"

"Yes; but you ought to have given directions for it to be prepared for you. I would have undertaken to have it ready for you myself, if I had known! Tell me, isn't there anything I can do to help your dear little daughter in her difficulties? She must be overwhelmed with her responsibilities, I'm sure."

"You are too kind, Lady Alicia. But I think the worst of it is over. We have roaring fires going all day. Look at that."

And he pointed to the coal heaped up and blazing in the

wide, wasteful, old-fashioned grate.

"Yes, that is very good, so far as it goes. But the furniture's damp too, and ought to be dried in the open air. Let me send you a couch, a comfortable one. I suppose you lie down a good deal?"

"I'm afraid I must own to that. But you are too kind."

"Not at all, not at all. I'll make a note of it. And now tell me, isn't there anything else I can send? Is your appetite fairly good? Have you any weaknesses that want humouring? What does your doctor order you to drink?"

"Dry champagne," replied Alaric Smith, promptly.

"That is what he recommends. But really—"

"I'll make a note of that too, and send you some. Oh no, I won't be stopped. For the sake of that dear girl of yours, I would do anything, anything in the world I could, to hasten your recovery."

"You know Nellie?"

"Oh yes. Hasn't she told you? She's a perfect darling. Believe me, dear Mr. Smith, you may rely upon my being a good friend to her, whatever happens. I never met a girl to whom I took a more instinctive liking than I did to her."

"She's a dear child, indeed," replied Mr. Smith, suavely, "and a great comfort to me in my trials. Poverty and affliction, Lady Alicia, would be easy enough to bear but for the fact that she must be included in my sufferings."

"She shall not have to bear them, trust me," said the lady earnestly. "I'll see to that. Do you propose to remain

here?"

"Well, I'm not in a state of health to travel about much."

"I see. So for the present you consider yourself a pr-" She recollected herself, and changed her sentence : "an invalid. You'll let me come and see you again, I hope?"

"I shall be more than happy, more than flattered, Lady

Alicia. The time seems long when one is helpless."
"Of course it does. I'll bring you something to read, something bright and entertaining. And I won't forget the couch—or the champagne. No, don't come out with me. Stay in the warm room. These May nights are very cold. Oh. I ought to apologise for coming so late, but I only heard of your return this evening, and I came at once. I wouldn't wait for anything—not even for dinner!"

"You are too good, Lady Alicia."

"Oh, no one is that—certainly not I. But fellow-Christians must help each other, and be compassionate towards each other, must they not?"

"Ah, if only all thought and felt like you!"

And the three persons in the dining-room heard host and guest exchanging civil speeches in the cooing artificial tone which may hide so much, as the little great lady crossed the hall and went out, Mrs. Barr curtseying to her as she passed.

There was almost a sort of scramble when Lady Alicia. had gone to hear Alaric Smith's version of what had passed.

They found him lying back in his wicker armchair, gazing contemplatively at the fire.

"Well, what did her ladyship say to you?" asked Joel



187

Bridger, unable to control his impatience to hear what had taken place.

"Oh, she came to say how sorry she was for the way I'd been treated, and to ask what she could do for me," said Alaric Smith, in a gentle and martyr-like tone.

The two men stared. "Did she—say that?"

Moon looked incredulous, but took care to keep out of Mr. Smith's sight.

"Yes; she's going to send me some wine," went on Alaric Smith. "She was very nice, very nice indeed. My heart quite warmed to her, and I felt I could almost overlook what I've suffered at the hands of certain members of her family. No doubt the poor lady is conscientious enough to be ashamed of their behaviour."

There was a dead silence. The other two men almost began to ask themselves whether this patient invalid were really the artful rogue who would not give up his plunder, or even share it with his friends? Nellie listened to them all, almost breathless, and wondered how this farce would end? She knew what Lady Alicia's motives were, knew that it was curiosity which brought her to The Firs, and a wish to know how things were going on there. Perhaps the old lady would have succeeded in deceiving her as to her real thoughts on the matter of the theft, but for Lord Alford's outspoken comments on his aunt's behaviour. Lady Alicia had professed never to have believed in Alaric Smith's guilt: but the Earl had stated distinctly that this was not so.

There was a little constraint among the party for the rest of the evening; Joel Bridger and Moon were, however, not merely as civil as ever, but even more so. And they did not forget to include Nellie in their courteous attentions. The girl valued these at no more than their just worth, satisfied that it was her expectations as her father's daughter which insured her so much good will.

The whole situation sickened, alarmed her. There was a barrier between her and this strange father whom she seemed never to have known before. Not only did he not invite her confidence, but he seemed to repel it. Half a dozen times she had wanted to confess to him that she had stayed a night at Heynes Hall, that her life had been saved by Lord Alford; but each time she put off the avowal, frightened into reserve by that impassive demeanour which seemed to form a shell to conceal the real man underneath. She felt that she must wait for an opening, or for chance to make known to her father what she herself dared not tell him.

Perhaps Lady Alicia would help her.

But the next day came, and the old lady brought a case of champagne with her in the carriage, and told them she had sent the new couch by the carrier. When, however, Nellie, intercepting her on the way to the drawing-room, asked her if she would break the news to the invalid, and so prepare him for softening towards the Earl, Lady Alicia put her hand upon the girl's and shook her head.

"I don't think, if I were you, dear," she whispered insinuatingly into her ear, "that, if you haven't mentioned it, I would bring the matter forward just yet. My dear nephew has rather an unfortunate reputation in some respects, and your dear father might look upon his perfectly disinterested kindness to you in a wrong light. Don't you think so, dear?"

"Oh!" said Nellie, half scared, half disgusted at finding herself entangled in the meshes of these plotters. For that the artful old lady had her own family's interests to serve in these visits to The Firs the girl well knew.

Then Lady Alicia, all smiles and gentle words, sailed into the drawing-room, and was gracious and sweet as she knew how to be, and sympathized with the invalid, who, strange to say, never seemed so ill as when his kind visitor came to cheer and condole with him. So ill did he look, indeed,

189

that Lady Alicia glided insensibly from cheerful small-talk into graver subjects, and without going so far as to preach to him, drew him gently on from topic to topic, until she suggested the question whether he had settled the future of his dear daughter, and whether the sweet girl had any idea how ill he was?

Alaric Smith slowly shook his head.

"I hate to sadden her," said he.

"And so," suggested the old lady, kindly, "you have no one in whom you can confide, to whom you can speak out what is in your mind?"

"No one," said he, under his breath.

She paused and looked at him.

"Am I wrong," murmured she, "in supposing you have something on your mind, Mr. Smith—something of which you would like to unburden yourself to a true friend?"

Alaric Smith's eyes gleamed for a moment with an odd light, but he was turning his head away, and she did not see it.

"You are right," said he, in a low voice. "There is something I wish to say—something, too, that I wish to—to give up to—to the persons to whom it rightfully belongs. It may clear up a mystery——" She listened with unmistakable interest. "Nay, it may do more than that!"

"Couldn't you trust—me?" said she. And her voice

trembled with eagerness.

He turned upon her his haggard brown eyes, and looked intently at her.

"I think I could," whispered he.

And slowly rising, he looked out of the windows, as if to ascertain that no one was in sight. Then he went to the secretaire in the corner by the fireplace, took a key out of his pocket, unlocked a flap that fell down, revealing a nest of little locked drawers. One of these he opened, and standing with his back to her, he put his hand in stealthily,

and drawing something out, bent his head over it for some minutes.

Then he turned quickly and put into her hand a little

rough wooden box.

"Don't open it," said he, in a low voice, "until you are outside the house. And be sure that, when you do, you are quite alone."

"I promise," said she, hoarsely.

And as she took the box her hand trembled, for she had no doubt whatever that her wiles had prevailed, and that within the little deal case with its sliding lid there lay the Countess's diamond.



CHAPTER XX

One of the very first of the gardening operations which Gustavus Moon had superintended so carefully had been the clearing of the drive and the reopening of the rusty gates. Lady Alicia's carriage, therefore, was waiting outside the front door of The Firs when the old lady came out, the little wooden box in her hand, her features quivering with excitement and her eyes glowing with triumph.

Alaric Smith, bland and smiling, was at the big drawingroom window, bowing and waving his hand. She had, therefore, perforce to restrain her desire to open the box at once and to feast her eyes upon the brilliancy of the jewel

which she doubted not was inside.

Another pair of eyes were watching her from the middle of the little flower-garden which lay between the house and the plantation. Gustavus Moon, who had been as busy as ever in his search for what he believed to be buried among the trees, had noted the arrival of the carriage from Heynes Hall with no little uneasiness.

He had seen just enough of the old lady while he was at the Hall to appreciate the fact that she might prove more than a match for the combined forces of himself and Bridger, and when he caught sight of the corner of the wooden box, he turned ashy white, and even made an instinctive movement forward, as if he would have challenged her right to the possession of the treasure.

Lady Alicia, however, was fully alert to the value of what she was carrying; and, casting jealous glances around

her, she saw the young man watching from the middle of what had once been a lawn, and lost no time in taking shelter in the recesses of the antiquated vehicle which had brought her.

Moon, beside himself with rage and alarm, went into the house, presented himself before Alaric Smith with his face

distorted with emotion.

"D-d-do you know, Smith, that that old woman is—is running off with something of yours? She's carrying a little wooden box in her hand, and peeping and peering about her for all the world as if she'd stolen something!"

The invalid patted the young man on the back and

laughed softly.

"No, no, my boy, you are too hasty, too hasty," he said gently. "What you saw in her hand is something I gave her myself, something which belongs to the Cannington family, which I think they'll be glad to have back again."

Moon was in a frenzy.

"What-what was it?" gasped he.

But Mr. Smith was reticent and calm.

"Nothing that would interest you, my dear boy. Just tell the men, will you, not to cut back the yews too close. I like them bushy."

In the mean time Lady Alicia, once safely within the hedges bordering the drive, had pushed back the lid of the box, and carefully lifted the first layer of the cotton wool within. The treasure lay revealed before her, lying on a little scrap of paper on which were a couple of lines neatly written in pencil.

But the treasure was not the Countess's diamond. It was a little common key, and the inscription on the paper

was as follows-

"The key of the bag which was stolen from me at Paddington station seven years ago."

Lady Alicia stared at the wretched thing, and then her

193

feelings overcame her, and she gasped out, under her breath, an epithet such as ladies are not supposed to use.

That homeward drive seemed never-ending to the indignant woman. When she got home it was nearly dark, and the lights were beginning to glimmer in the windows of the great Elizabethan mansion as the carriage drove up to the terrace steps.

"Why, what's the matter, aunt?" cried Lord Alford, when, ten minutes later, he was surprised, as he sat in his study, by the entrance of the old lady with signs of deep emotion on her face.

"Oh, Jack, I've been deceived, most cruelly, wickedly deceived, and by—by that infamous creature who stole—stole the jewels!"

Lord Alford turned round, placed a chair for her, and leaning over the back of another, laughed in a leisurely fashion.

"What old Smith?" said he, lightly. "Ah! what did I tell you? I warned you not to go and see him; I told you it didn't look well, and that it would be wiser as well as more dignified to have nothing to do with him, didn't I?"

The little old lady, who had sunk into the offered chair,

gulped down a sob.

"I—I didn't like. So—so unchristian!" murmured she. "And—and he seemed so—so quiet, so nice, I—I thought he must be penitent!"

The young Earl frowned.

"I hope, aunt, you didn't preach to him," he said

quickly.

"Preach! Oh no. I took him some champagne. I do wish I hadn't! And a sofa! And I'm too late to stop that, I'm afraid. The carrier will have taken it by this time!"

"Champagne! Sofa! Why, what on earth-"

He was getting curious, angry. Lady Alicia rose and placed her little hand upon his arm.

"There, there, that was my doing, and no business of yours! I—I hoped to soften his hard heart, and to induce him to relieve his conscience."

"I see. And he was one too many for you."

"The wretch! Yes," sobbed Lady Alicia. "He—he said all sorts of nice things to me, and I—said all the sympathetic things I could to him, and then he—he offered to give me something, something of value, be-be-belonging to my family. Of course I thought it was the diamond!"

The Earl put out his hand for the box which she was holding.

"Then the-the creature gave me-that!"

Lord Alford took the box, opened it, took out the key, read the inscription, and burst into a roar of laughter.

"Can you have the heart to laugh?" quavered she.

"Can you have the heart to do anything but admire a man with a sense of humour like that?" retorted Lord Alford, still unable to subdue his merriment. "He's had you on toast, aunt; and, 'pon my word, I think it serves you right!"

The little old lady's eyes blazed.

"You're very ungrateful, Jack," she said. "I did it for your sake, remember! You would have benefited by it if I'd succeeded."

"No, aunt, I'm not ungrateful," said he, patting her shoulder kindly, and making her sit down again. "Only I think it would have been better to leave him alone."

"What! And let him enjoy the property he stole, without an effort to make him give it up? I can't think why you don't set the police on his track; for I'm perfectly certain he's living now on the money he got for the jewels—your jewels!"

"Well, if he is, what can we do? He's had his punishment, served his term, and he can't be punished over again. And, by Jove! I suppose you'll be shocked to hear me say

195

so, but I rather admire the old rascal's pluck in going through with it without flinching, always telling the same story, giving us no loophole, and snapping his fingers at the lot of us."

"You admire his wickedness?"

"No; his spirit. He could have got off with a much lighter punishment if he had confessed and helped us to recover the jewels. He wouldn't, and now no doubt he looks upon them, if he still has them, as his own property, bought and paid for."

"I won't argue with you," said Lady Alicia with dignity, as she rose to go. "I've always taken your part, Jack, when people have called you unprincipled. But really I must draw the line when I hear you defending

a thief!"

She had left the despised key in its wooden box on her nephew's writing-table. When she went out of the room, he took up this worthless relic of the crime and carried it with him to the Long Gallery.

A number of specimen tables stood here, with snuffboxes, miniatures, and other curiosities, locked safely under the glass lids. Unkind people said that sometimes Lord Alford's oddly assorted guests helped themselves to the contents of these cases; but if they did they were never brought to book.

The Earl went straight to the table that was nearest to the famous picture of the lady with the scarf, and unlocking the lid with one of a bunch of small keys which he carried about him, he turned over the contents of the case with a curious smile on his lips until he took out, from among a number of other things, a very large crystal, the replica which had been made, in the lifetime of his father, of the famous diamond.

Then, with a shrug of the shoulders, he replaced the crystal in the centre of the case, and laid beside it the wooden box containing the key of the stolen bag. It was fitting that these two relics of the famous crime should lie

together; all, as he said to himself with a wry smile, that remained of his family jewels, with the exception of the things that Nellie had returned to him.

It was about a fortnight later when one evening, as Nellie was returning to The Firs from the village, where she had been to post a letter for her father, she came unexpectedly upon Lord Alford in a lane that was a short cut from the post-office.

He was in riding-dress, and was standing beside his horse with his arm through the reins.

"Well," said he, holding out his hand, "so I've run you to earth at last, have I?"

The girl's face had already betrayed her joy at the meeting. Coming upon him thus suddenly, she had no time to prepare a decorous artificial manner; and the flash of her grey eyes, the sudden lighting up of the face, showed him, with touching eloquence, how glad she was.

Before he had finished speaking she had recovered her composure, and was ready to answer with correct primness—

"I'm very glad to see you, Lord Alford."

He held her hand, out of mischief, because she was so

very prim.

"I've run you to earth, I say," repeated he, in a sonorous voice; "I've been watching you down into the village and then watching you up again, and I got off my horse so that you shouldn't see me and run away."

She had grown rather pale while he said this, but she answered gently—

"I shouldn't have run away."

He had a sudden intuition that the tears were nearer than was convenient, and he dropped her hand and said kindly—

"Well, I hope not. Now tell me, how are you getting on?"

She hesitated. Then the knowledge that at last she had a really sympathetic hearer broke down her reserve, and she replied quickly—

197

"Just as badly as possible. Oh, Lord Alford, it's—it's even worse than I expected."

"Isn't your father kind to you, then?" he asked sharply.

"Kind! Oh yes, in his way. But it's not the old way. He's so changed that there isn't a single point of sympathy between us. He lives in his own world, and just peeps out of it at us."

Lord Alford was interested and amused by the simile.

"Who's us?" said he.

She frowned.

"Oh, the two conspirators, Mr. Bridger and that man Moon,"

"Moon too, ch?"

"Yes. You know I told you that before. They take it in turns to watch my father, as a cat watches a mouse. While Bridger is at his office Moon is here, and then on Sundays it's Mr. Bridger's turn, and Mr. Moon takes a day off. They are just like the little old man and woman in the weather toy. When one comes in the other goes out. And I hate them both."

She shuddered.

The Earl laughed.

"And how does your father treat them?"

She looked at him with a sudden gleam of humour in her eyes.

"I believe," she said solemnly, "that he gets all he can out of both of them, and laughs at them all the time!"

"Ha, ha, ha! The old fox! That's just the way he treated my poor old aunt. Took her presents and made a fool of her, as she deserved."

It was Nellie's turn to smile a little.

"I was afraid he did," she said. "For she was so very, very kind and attentive, and sweet-voiced and gentle. And then, quite suddenly, after those two visits, she didn't come any more."

He laughed again, but he would not tell her of the trick

Alaric Smith had played upon Lady Alicia, for fear of

causing the girl more pain.

"It's all very miserable for you, child. I'm always thinking of you, and wondering what's going to become of you. Is your father really so very ill, or not?"

Nellie looked up frankly.

"I'm sure I don't know," she said. "He coughs a good deal, and sometimes he seems very ill and weak. But I'm never sure whether it's quite genuine, and his appetite is good, and he's very, very particular about everything. He's always saying that he hasn't much time left to make up for what he's lost. He's determined to have the best of everything while he can. And that's really all I'm sure of about him."

"Doesn't he trouble his head about you?"

Again she looked at him quite frankly.

"Not a bit, I think," said she simply, "except as part of his property, something to be proud of. He tells me my dresses are not pretty enough, and that he's going to buy me some handsomer ones. And he likes my playing and singing, though I don't think he listens much. But he never asks a word about the years I spent away from him, and "—she dropped her voice—"he doesn't even know who paid for my last term at school."

"Then I shouldn't tell him, if I were you," said Lord

Alford.

"I'm not going to. I've never mentioned your name to him, or he to me. But he looks black whenever any one else speaks of you."

The Earl nodded.

"He's consistent, at any rate," said he.

"Yes. It's strange that I should be talking about this to you," she went on quickly; "but you're the only person I know who ever tells the truth. Every one else is always acting, saying what suits the purpose of the moment. And it's such a relief—oh, such a splendid relief



199

—to get a straightforward look and a straightforward word at last!"

The young man's face glowed with pleasure.

"It's nice of you, Nellie, to say that. You're the only creature in the world, you know, who gives me a good character."

"Then," retorted the girl, stoutly, "I'm the only person who gives you the right one."

He looked into her face with frank delight, and the girl

reddened a little without knowing why.

Then some slight sound near her, or perhaps some instinct that she was watched, made her look round. And in the field on the right, behind the hedge, she saw the malicious face of Gustavus Moon.

CHAPTER XXI

THE strange circumstances in which her life had lately been passed had taught Nellie the value of prudence, and therefore she did not give way to her first impulse, and make known to Lord Alford the fact that he and she were watched.

Instinctively she knew, without having time to think the matter out, that such a proceeding would lead to an awkward encounter between the two young men, to a scene which on all accounts it were better to avoid.

"What's the matter?" asked the Earl, on seeing the expression of alarm that flitted over her features.

"Nothing," said she, "except that I ought to be at home. My father expects the utmost punctuality, and he is put out for the evening if we're late for dinner."

Lord Alford's eyes had followed the direction of hers, but had seen nothing; for Moon had taken care to hide himself more effectually on finding out that he was discovered.

"That means that I'm dismissed, I suppose?"

She smiled with some constraint.

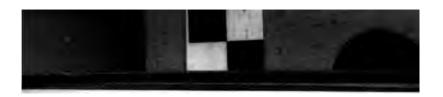
"I shouldn't say that, Lord Alford."

"You're afraid you've been too nice, and that I shall presume upon your good opinion."

Again the girl's honest eyes glowed as she met his

fearlessly.

"No, no," she said eagerly. "I tell you again I'm afraid of nothing with you. Why should I be? You've



201

always treated me so kindly, so—so perfectly, that I—I can scarcely bear to think that any one else in the world should not look upon you just as I do."

"And—and how's that?"

She had walked on, and he, leading his horse, had kept pace with her, so that they were now well out of hearing of Gustavus Moon. Then she stopped.

"I can't say, and—I won't try to say. And you mustn't

ask me. Good-bye, Lord Alford."

He began to put out his hand, and then drew it back

almost angrily.

"I don't see why I should let a little bit of a girl like you treat me exactly as she likes, and order me about as nobody—no woman—ever did before. Why shouldn't I walk on with you as far as the end of the lane? I'm doing no harm; I'm not trying to flirt with you. Am I?"

"Of course not."

"There's no 'of course' about it," said he, impatiently. She held out her hand again.

"Good-bye, Lord Alford."

He looked at her again, laughed again, and took her hand in a hearty grip.

"Good-bye, Miss Prim. God bless you, child."

He was on his horse, raising his hat to her, a dozen yards away, before she could draw breath. Then, with a fearsome look round, she hurried on; for she knew that she had a worse encounter before her.

But when Gustavus Moon came up with her, as he did a few moments later, before she could get to the end of the lane, he was by no means in an aggressive or uncivil mood. On the contrary, he was bent on making himself as agreeable as possible to the girl whom he suddenly perceived that he was foolish in despising.

For he was shrewd enough to see that there was some very strong bond of sentiment between the Earl and Nellie, and he saw, with rapid appreciation of the situation, the

danger to be feared from Smith's daughter if she were to take sides with the legitimate owner of the Countess's diamond, against those honest gentlemen who thought themselves better entitled to it.

It was, therefore, in the humblest and most courteous manner that he addressed her.

"I hope, Miss Smith," he said, raising his hat and speaking in his gentlest and most persuasive tones, "you don't think I was playing the spy just now?"

"What were you doing then?" retorted Nellie, with

spirit.

He was rather taken aback by this retort.

"I—I take the greatest interest in you, Miss Nellie, as I'm sure you know," he answered, speaking even more gently than before. "And, if you'll allow me to say so, I was troubled and anxious at seeing you talking to a man who, though he is one of the most fascinating fellows in the world, has rather—rather too well-known a disposition to make love to every handsome girl he meets."

"But I'm not a handsome girl, and Lord Alford has never made love to me. You can scarcely expect me to cut him dead when I meet him by chance—and I never meet him except by chance—when he saved my life for one thing, and when I've stayed at his place for another."

"To cut him dead! Of course not. But—well, what would your father say if he knew you even spoke to him, your father who believes Lord Alford did him a great

wrong?"

Nellie grew red and trembled. What would her father say indeed? That was one of the problems which were troubling her. That he would be angry as she had never seen him angry before she very well knew; and with every day's delay in telling him of her adventures on the yacht and at Heynes Hall, her reluctance to confess increased.

But yet the truth would have to be told. And she said

to herself, with desperation, that it might as well be told by

203

Gustavus Moon as by anybody else.

"Very well," she said, with a calmness which did not accord with her feelings, "tell him. I should like you to tell him. I don't wish to deceive him in any way, and though there was no harm in my going to the Hall or on the yacht, I confess I haven't yet had the courage to tell him Tell him-tell him about it to-night." myself.

The young man was touched. Indeed he had never had any intention of rousing her father's anger in the way he suggested; he had meant only to warn her off ground which

was dangerous for him.

"I never dreamt of doing such a thing, Miss Nellie!" he said, with warmth which was genuine. "I hope you don't think me capable of it. No. I only ventured to speak to you for your own sake; and whatever you might do or say, nothing would induce me to breathe a word to your father to make him angry with you!"

The girl was quick to see that he meant what he said, and she was touched in her turn. Though she neither liked nor trusted this man, she was so forlorn, so friendless at The Firs, with the father who was like a stranger and with no one of her own sex to talk to, that she responded even to the perhaps rather dubious kindness of her father's mysterious friend.

"Thank you," she said. "I really don't see why you should."

Moon saw the opportunity of trying to find out some-

thing he very much wanted to know.

"You have a great deal more to fear from the indiscretion of Lady Alicia than from me," he said. "She is an artful old lady, and her kindness to you and your father was all put on, in the hope of getting something out of you. Do you know, by-the-by, that she really did get something out of your father?"

"What?" asked Nellie, with blanched cheeks.

He saw that her ignorance was real, and he wondered. Did Alaric Smith really give the great diamond to the old lady? Was it possible that he had struck a bargain for himself through her? If so, had Lady Alicia kept even her nephew in ignorance of the transaction? Certainly he had said nothing about anything so momentous to Nellie, whose innocence was evident.

Gustavus Moon was on thorns. Now that this idea had once entered his mind, it possessed him to the exclusion of everything else. He could not rest, he could not spend another evening in the dull society of the somnolent and reserved Smith and of his quiet and shy daughter. He felt that he must go at once to Heynes Hall and investigate.

In the mean time there was Nellie's question to answer.

"Your father gave her something in a little wooden box," said he. "What it was, of course, I don't know, but it looks as if she was satisfied, since she hasn't been here since."

Nellie looked as deeply interested as she felt.

"I wonder if Lord Alford knows?" exclaimed she, with her mind full of doubts, hopes, and fears.

"I've a good mind to go over to the Hall this very evening, and try to find out," said Moon.

"Oh no, you'd better not!"

"Yes, yes, I will. I'll be very careful, very cautious. And I see it would relieve your mind too, if I could find anything out. Perhaps you don't know, Miss Nellie"—and he bent his head and tried to look into her eyes—"how much pleasure it would give me to do you the least little service."

Although she quite understood that it was on his own account rather than on hers that he was going, Nellie was glad that he carried out his intention. They had been walking towards the house all this time, and they were now halfway up the drive.



205

"I'll go at once," said he. "I can get a fly in the village, and I shall be at the Hall in time for dinner."

Both of them knew that in that happy-go-lucky Liberty Hall he would be made welcome, without any question, being one of those light-hearted, genial-mannered fellows who can make themselves at home in any society; and he left her there and then to start on his impromptu journey.

Nellie made up her mind to take advantage of this, the first evening she had passed alone with her father, to brave his anger, and to try to soften him by an account of the kindness she had received from the Earl. She was nerving herself for the effort throughout dinner, but she felt how hard it would be to make any impression upon that stony hardness behind which she could detect no sign of his old gentleness and tenderness.

He ate and drank with his usual hearty enjoyment, and then Nellie went as usual into the drawing-room and sat down to the piano, with her heart beating very fast. The moment he entered she would begin her story; and, no matter how angry he might be with her, she would go on to the end, leaving nothing untold, no prayer for his kindness unuttered.

But he did not come.

She played a piece of which he had expressed a curt approval; but still he did not come. She sang one of his favourite songs, one that he had said her mother used to sing; but the result was the same.

Had he fallen asleep in his chair? Had he-

With a horrible fear on her heart, Nellie slipped out of the one room into the other; but her father was not there.

As if he had guessed her purpose, and meant to thwart it, Mr. Smith had retired for the night, and her opportunity was gone.

In the mean time Gustavus Moon, driving fast in the trap he had hired, had reached Haynes Hall in time for dinner.

He was an even more welcome guest than he had hoped,

for he found the same party there as before, but not in the same good spirits.

Miss Dawes, who was extremely sulky, seized him, and twitted him with the admiration which kept him in the neighbourhood of The Firs.

"How do you know I am at The Firs?" asked Moon,

surprised.

"Oh, Lady Alicia saw you there. I hope they treat you better than they did her. She went there one day and came back in a very bad temper, and said all sorts of nasty things about everybody. Fancy that little Miss Demure, that the Earl's so taken up with, being the daughter of the man who stole his jewels!"

"Who told you?" said Moon.

"Oh, Lady Alicia did. And she said he was the most hardened old sinner she ever met. But for goodness' sake don't say so before the Earl. He won't let the subject be mentioned; and as for the girl, I believe he's awfully gone on her. And I know they give each other presents, for I saw in her hand some splendid jewellery, which she said was her mother's, but which I believe was—somebody else's mother's. And—— But there, I don't want to get the girl into trouble. And as you appear to be in love with her too, I suppose it'all right. Only I wish I'd been born thin, and with big grey eyes. It seems to be a taking combination!"

"Jealous, eh?" said Moon, maliciously.

"Oh dear, no, not me. It's Val Vane who is jealous. She's sent an anonymous letter to Lady Alford, I believe, to tell her of what is going on."

"Val Vane, eh? Not-Miss Dawes!"

"Oh dear, no. I don't condescend to do those things," said Mollie, snappishly. "But it serves him right if somebody does, for he's grown most awfully dull and stupid!"

Moon heard all this with vivid interest, and having been invited to stay the night, as he had expected, he made good use of his time, wormed himself into the confidence of



207

Lady Alicia, and got from her the story of the little wooden box and its insulting contents. Moon professed the greatest indignation. He fumed, he exclaimed, he sympathized in the most effusive way.

"Yes," said Lady Alicia, aglow with her own wounded feeling, "and there it is, in one of the cases in the gallery, just as he gave it to me. My nephew put it there himself; why, I don't know. For it's not pleasant to have the remembrance of such an insult perpetuated."

On the first opportunity, Moon stole away into the gallery, and inspected the wooden box, the key, and the inscription. He was uneasy about this trick, which reminded him of the manner in which Alaric Smith was treating himself and his ally Bridger.

Moon was a man who could turn his hand to anything, and he contrived to pick the lock of the specimen table which contained the key, in order that he might inspect it at his leisure.

As he did so, the replica of the Countess's diamond caught his eye. It had been hidden by the toe of a Turkish slipper, and it suddenly occurred to him that it would never be missed, while it might prove useful in the game he had to play with wily old Smith as an antagonist. So he slipped the crystal into his pocket, replaced the key in the case, contrived to turn the lock again, and went away.

Half the night he lay tossing, devising plans for getting at the whereabouts of the original of his crystal: and so much worried was he at the difficulties which kept cropping up, that on the following day he was as anxious to get back to The Firs as he had been to get to the Hall.

He had an intuition that something was going wrong in his absence; and though he could not escape till late in the afternoon, being wanted to make one of a bridge party, he was restless and uneasy, and did not escape a good deal of "chaff" about the attraction which drew him to The Firs.

When at last he got away, dusk was coming on.

He drove up to the gates of The Firs in one of Lord Alford's phætons, threw the reins to the groom, jumped down, and finding no one at the lodge, almost ran up the drive, with an ugly presentiment at his heart.

The blinds of the house were drawn down, and there was no light anywhere. He pulled the bell violently, and the new parlourmaid ran, with a scared face, to open the

door.

208

"Mr. Smith !" gasped he. "Not-not dead ?"

"Oh no, sir. Not dead. But he and Miss Nellie went away this morning."



CHAPTER XXII

Gustavus Moon was aghast.

Alaric Smith gone away, and with his daughter! For the first moment after the maid had broken the news to him, he could not speak. It seemed that the downfall of all his hopes was come.

"When did they go?" he asked at last, his voice not

yet quite under control.

"The very first thing this morning, sir. Mr. Smith rang his bell, and I took him up his hot water, and he just put out his head, and he was ready dressed, and he said to me, 'Tell Miss Nellie,' says he, 'to put on her hat and jacket at once, for I'm going to take her to London. And,' he says, 'get me a fly as quick as you can.' Miss Nellie came out of her room, quite scared-like, sir. And in less than half an hour, sir, the fly was round and they had both had what breakfast they could eat; it wasn't much, they were in such a hurry. And with just a change of things, it wasn't much more, in their two bags, they were off."

"Did they say when you were to expect them back?"

asked Moon.

"In a week, sir, Mr. Smith said."

"Did he leave any message for me?"

" No, sir."

"All right. Thanks."

He turned away, feeling as cold as if the June day had been December. Alaric Smith, wily as ever, had lived quietly, on the watch for an opportunity to escape with his

booty; and he, Moon, who prided himself on his astuteness, had been befooled as easily as Lady Alicia herself.

Fuming and desperate, he went off to Bath and burst in upon Joel Bridger during office hours with his tale of woe. The lawyer, though he was probably as much disgusted as the other, took the news more calmly.

"He is a most unprincipled man, I grieve to say!" was his solemn and slow comment on Smith's hurried disappearance. "And our hopes of restitution seem to be farther than ever from being realized."

"I should say so," retorted Moon, with a contemptuous nod. "He's at Liverpool by this time, I've no doubt."

"Liverpool?"

"Why, yes; of course he can't dispose of the stone in England."

"But he left word he'd be back in a week!"

"Left word!" repeated Moon, contemptuously. "What's his word worth?"

"That remains to be seen. We needn't give up all hope yet," said Mr. Bridger. "Somehow I don't think it's likely he would give up The Firs so soon, now that he's been renovating it and making it so comfortable. I have an idea that he's too careful for that. He's spent money over the place——"

"Your money," put in Moon.

"Well, well, he'd made it his, hadn't he? He was not likely to throw it away. For my part, I confess he's too artful for me; I've always been a straightforward man——"

"H'm!" said Moon, dryly.

Mr. Bridger grew red, but he went on steadily—

"And I shall not believe the worst of Smith, any more than I should of any of my fellow-creatures, while I can do otherwise."

"Well," said Moon, "I hope your trust in human nature may be justified. In the mean time, though of course the



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old fox has made off with the prize, I shall take advantage of my position as his friend to keep watch and ward over the property he's left behind."

"Will they let you into the house?" said Bridger with

interest.

"Oh, they shall," returned Moon.

And with a nod he left the office.

It was nearly a week after the disappearance of Alaric Smith and his daughter when a great excitement was caused at Heynes Hall by the arrival of Lady Alford, who drove up quite unheralded, stalked into the house with her head held very high, and with the air of an offended empress, stared in disdainful silence at those of her husband's guests whom she met upon her way upstairs, and finally burst into his study unannounced and into the presence of her husband, who started up from his chair by the writing-table, and hastily crammed into his pocket something at which he had been looking.

"Persis I" exclaimed he, with more surprise than

delight.

"Yes, Persis. I hope you're glad to see me; but one would hardly think it."

"Well, you—you've taken me by surprise, you know."

He was scarcely at his ease, and the two, as they stood facing each other, formed a curious contrast in that as in almost every other respect.

For Lady Alford, in look, in tone, and in manner, was as hard as iron, hard in the expression of her black eyes; harsh in the tones of her rather strident voice, and aggressive in her attitude, as she put one hand on her hip and stared, with more of defiance than tenderness, at her husband.

Lady Alford, who was about thirty years of age, older by half a dozen years than the Earl, was rather what is called showy-looking than handsome, and was one of those women who, used from early childhood to every luxury and to almost every extravagance, pass their lives in a state of

absurd poverty of their own making, through the chronic inability or unwillingness to learn the value of money.

Always very expensively, but seldom very well dressed, she was always in debt to her dressmaker, her milliner, and half a dozen other tradespeople, who overcharged her for everything, and dressed her as they liked.

Fairly tall, but of indifferent and even what is called rawboned figure, she had bold eyes, a nose too long for beauty, and the discontented expression of the never-satisfied, spoilt woman.

She was wearing half a dozen things which would have looked better apart than they did together; an enormous feather-trimmed black hat; a tailor-made dress of fine fawncoloured cloth; a lace blouse, and a huge feather boa of a pale grey colour; while her restless movements showed from time to time an underskirt of turquoise blue silk, and high-heeled shoes of bronze kid, with tiny beaded straps across.

For all her restless movements, her affectations, her luxurious untidiness and importation of the latest perfume, which suggested the chorus-girl of a musical comedy rather than a well-born and well-bred woman, there was about Lady Alford that subtile air of arrogance which is in itself part of the charm of certain women of rank, an air of being of supreme importance which impresses the simple-minded with respect and something akin to admiration.

She laughed harshly and affectedly at her husband's

reply.

"Taken you by surprise! That's just what I meant to do. Pray, where is this girl whom you're so taken up with that you can't even answer my letters?"

"Girl! What girl? As for your letters, I can't answer one without answering them all. They all say the same thing; you never write to me except to ask for money."

"And you never write back except to say you can't give me any."

213

"Well, it's quite true. You have your allowance. Your own father says it's a handsome one."

"And what allowance do you make this girl? The

daughter of the thief who stole-"

She stopped short in surprise. For over Lord Alford's tanned, handsome face there had suddenly appeared a deep flush; his blue eyes were bright with anger, and she saw that she had gone too far.

"Will you please remember that the fact that you are my wife does not relieve you from the obligation of respecting the ordinary decencies of life? You have no right to speak of any girl in the way you are doing. In the case of this particular girl, of Miss Smith, it's outrageous. She is a perfectly innocent and harmless little schoolgirl, not only absolutely unconnected with anything her father may have done, but overwhelmed by the knowledge of the shadow which lies over them both. I must beg you, not only to abstain from any such comments to me, but to everybody else."

He was so passionately in earnest, so quiet but so determined in his manner, that for a few moments even the voluble, thoughtless Persis was silenced. At last, however, she recovered from her surprise, laughed disdainfully, and said—

"It's of no use to put on those airs with me, Jack. I know all about you, and I know too, that you have given this girl presents—presents of valuable jewellery."

"That's a lie. I've given her no presents. On the

contrary——"

He checked himself, and she, on the alert at once, said curiously—

"What do you mean by 'on the contrary?' Has she

given presents to you?"

She knew too much to be put off, and he had to admit the truth, though with misgivings as to what she would make of it.

"She has returned to me part of the stolen jewellery; one of the prying women about must have seen something of it. That is the whole truth."

Persis was much interested.

"So you've got some of it back? Why didn't you tell me? What part of it are you going to give me?"

"None."

She changed her tone, and came over to him to coax.

"Oh, come, you don't mean that, Jack. I've a right to some of it, haven't I? You say you have no money to give me; but you admit you have some of the jewellery back. Well, you can spare me some. Let me see it, at least."

"No," said Lord Alford, obstinately. "You have no right to it, and as a matter of fact I'm not going to part with any of it. I'm going to keep it while I can. It won't go till everything goes, which, at the rate we're living,

won't be long."

"You talk as if it were my fault."

"I'm not so sure that it's not. Part of the blame is yours, at any rate. You neglect your duties; you leave things to shift for themselves; I have to get my aunt to keep a check on the waste that goes on; if you had chosen to live here instead of passing your time in hotels and other people's houses, we certainly shouldn't have spent half as much or half as foolishly."

"Oh, blame me by all means, if you like. But really

you don't seem to have missed me much."

"Why should I? You were never very nice to me when you were here."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I suppose my tastes are not very domestic; but neither

are yours."

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"Well," said he restlessly, "we're wasting our time, aren't we? If you came for money, I've none to give you. If you came to satisfy yourself that I was not wounding



215

your tender heart by devotion to another woman, why, you're satisfied too, I should think."

Persis hesitated. She did not mind his sneers, but she was disappointed at not having been able to use his supposed indiscretions as a lever by which to obtain something from him.

"Look here, Jack," she said at last, "if you want me back I'm willing to stay. But of course you must turn out all this rabble of comic singers and serio-comics, and things who are flaunting about the place now."

Lord Alford reddened again.

"Indeed, I shall do nothing of the sort," said he shortly. "If you want to come back, I'll find some excuse for getting rid of the friends I have here now, and you shall return after they're gone. But you can't stay now unless you care for them to stay too."

"You won't turn them out for me, your wife?" cried

Persis, in a high-pitched rasping voice.

"No. They've done no harm, and they are not going to be bundled out neck and crop without notice."

Persis drew herself up with much dignity.

"Of course not," she said. "Of course you can prate about decency without practising it. Very well; I understand why you don't want me perfectly. And I'm going straight to The Firs to see this harmless little schoolgirl who is, I'm convinced, the cause of your unwillingness to behave properly to me."

"You can go to The Firs, if you haven't better taste than to do so," said the Earl, hotly. "But you won't find Miss Smith, because she's gone away with her father."

"And I suppose, since all is forgiven and forgotten, that

you pay for their little pleasure-trips!"

Lord Alford could not trust himself to answer, but dashed open the door and shut himself into his own room without another word.

Persis stood for a moment undecided, and then, perfectly

satisfied in her own mind that her husband was deceiving her, she ran downstairs, left the house, got into the fly which had brought her, and drove to The Firs.

It was a great disappointment to her to learn from the maid who opened the door that Mr. Smith and his daughter really were away, and she insisted very particularly upon

learning the date of their departure.

She had not got out of the fly, but was talking to the maid through the window, when Gustavus Moon, who had been pursuing his usual investigations about the house under pretence of making himself useful, appeared in the hall, attracted by the voice of the lady, who he did not know.

Lady Alford, seeing a good-looking young man who

looked like a gentleman, addressed him-

"Perhaps you can tell me, if you are a friend of Mr. Smith's, when he and his daughter are coming back?" she said, with the gracious manner she knew how to assume when she liked. "I've just come from Heynes Hall; perhaps you have heard of me—Lady Alford," she explained.

Moon had run out with great eagerness, and was by the vehicle, bowing and smiling. He was impressed by the fact that she was a Countess, by her dress, by her manner, by

the subtile air of luxury which pervaded her person.

He was shrewd enough to guess the motive which brought her, and he would have been ready to do any harm to poor Nellie to ingratiate himself with the woman of rank.

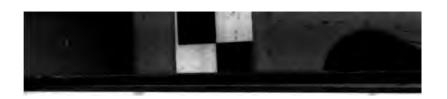
Persis, on her side, was ready, as she always was, to be

gracious to any good-looking man.

"I'm not a great friend of theirs," Moon said, "and they did not tell me when they thought of coming back. But I'll do my very best to find out, if the matter is of interest to you, Lady Alford."

"Thanks. You're awfully good. Everybody seems to take a great interest in this girl, and I'm curious to see her.

Is she so very handsome?"



"The homeliest, dowdiest little creature in the world," replied Moon, promptly, "a girl without a feature and without a frock."

Lady Alford laughed.

But even as the words died away on his lips, Gustavus Moon, hearing the sound of the crunching of wheels in the

drive, drew a long breath of dismay.

For dashing into the gravelled space before the house, dressed in a pale silk cloak and smartly cut cap to match, and looking as fresh and pretty as a rose, was Nellie Smith, on the front seat of the smartest motor-car that had ever been seen in the neighbourhood.

"Who's this?" snapped Lady Alford, sharply.



CHAPTER XXIII

"Who is this?" repeated Lady Alford, more querulously than before, as the driver of the motor-car pulled up close behind her shabby old fly, and Nellie got out.

As she did so, the folds of her long silk dust-coat parted and showed a charming frock of silver-grey alpaca with a silk blouse of the same colour trimmed with a cascade of coffee-coloured lace.

Gustavus Moon was dazzled, struck dumb, and Lady Alford, guessing the truth, impatiently turned the handle and jumped out of the fly.

"Are you the daughter of Mr. Alaric Smith?" she

asked Nellie, in the haughtiest of tones.

"Yes," said the girl, growing very red, for she understood that the question implied a taunt.

"I was told you were away."

"So I was. My father and I have been in London. I've only just come back."

"But your father is not with you?" went on Persis,

dictatorially and with obvious suspicion.

"I left him at Bath, at Mr. Bridger's office, and came on here to prepare for him."

"I should like to have a few words with you, if you don't mind."

"Will you come in?"

Nellie led the way into the house, past the frightened and disgusted Gustavus Moon, who was in a state of the utmost misery and anxiety, between these evidences of

219

Alaric Smith's newly acquired wealth on the one hand, and Lady Alford's belief that he had deceived her on the other.

He looked at Nellie in consternation mingled with involuntary admiration. It was the first time he had ever seen her well dressed, and the change from a well-worn stuff dress to a pretty and becoming toilette made a beauty of her at once.

A sort of uncomfortable feeling that he had been putting his money on the wrong horse took possession of him, when he saw the glance of veiled mistrust and dislike with which the young girl bowed silently to him as she went into the house.

Lady Alford rustled in aggressively, and then turned to inspect Nellie from head to foot. She was in a tumult of rage at the deception which she honestly believed to have been practised upon her. Here was the girl who had been represented as a dowdy and plain little schoolgirl, living quietly with her father, instead, she had proved to be a lovely girl who dressed perfectly, and who drove about the country without any paternal encumbrance, on a car which Persis herself would have liked to possess.

"I have been very curious to see you, Miss Smith," began the Countess in a rasping voice, "for I've heard a great deal about you."

"Indeed."

Lady Alford would not take any notice of the girl's offers of a seat, but stood erect, staring at her from head to foot, with such unmistakable malevolence that Nellie dreaded what she would say next, expecting an attack upon her father.

"Yes. I find that all they told me about you was quite wrong though. They said you were a schoolgirl, a dowdy little schoolgirl. That is not exactly a right description, is it?"

"I was a schoolgirl a month ago, and I was dowdy a

week ago," said Nellie, simply. "So what they told you was very nearly the truth."

"You have developed very rapidly! I must congratulate you on your cleverness."

"I think my new clothes have done more for me than

my cleverness," said Nellie.

"Oh, but you are clever. You have known how to get round my husband in a marvellous fashion."

Nellie grew very red.

"Who is your husband?" she asked, though she had an intuition what the answer would be.

"Can't you guess?" asked Persis, sarcastically.

"Is he Lord Alford?"

"Ah! you are clever, you see. Yes, my husband is Lord Alford, though, thanks to girls of your sort, I see so little of him that people may well be excused for not knowing that he is."

"What do you mean by 'girls of my sort?"

"Girls who have so little self-respect that they flirt with married men, give them presents, and accept presents in return."

"Did Lord Alford tell you that he gave me presents, and that I gave them to him?"

The simple question, put without any air of confusion or indignation, disconcerted the Countess a little.

"Of course he didn't."

"Then how do you know?"

"I put two and two together," answered Persis, with

arrogance.

"Well, you've put them together, but you haven't made them come to the right number," said the girl, quietly. "I've never flirted with Lord Alford. And as for presents, I've given back to him something of his that I found, that's all."

"And, in fact, you're amazed to see me here, I suppose?" said Persis, dryly.

22 I

"No; I was told you would come."

Persis looked surprised at last.

"You were told I should come!" repeated she.

"Yes. I was told you were always jealous, or pretended to be jealous, of every woman your husband spoke to,

except those you might reasonably be jealous of."

Persis did not like this at all. The truth of it was manifest, but it was none the more palatable for that. She began, in spite of herself, to understand that this girl was either really very innocent, or else the most dangerous rival she had ever had to fear. She had wanted a mere excuse for getting something out of her husband to keep her quiet, and she felt that this girl, whether she were quite as simple as she appeared or not, was not a mere pawn in the game.

"I think I'm the best judge whether my jealousy is reasonable or not," she said, with more seriousness than she had yet shown; "and I do think it very serious when people begin to talk about a married man and a young girl who's

only just left school!"

Nellie stared at her incredulously.

"Do they talk?" she said. "I don't think they do. But if so, why don't you stop the talk yourself? If you were living at Heynes Hall, people wouldn't talk, because there would be nothing to say."

"Do you presume to tell me what I ought to do?"

"Oh no; but I think if I were jealous of my husband I would live with him, and then I could see for myself whether I had any reason to be jealous or not."

Lady Alford stared at the girl for a few moments, and then burst out laughing. Of course if she had cared for her husband she would have taken these outspoken words differently; they would have moved her to some other emotion than mirth. But as it was, loving amusement and pleasure above anything else, and caring not two straws about the man she had married, except as one of the

necessaries of her position, she was suddenly struck by the comicality of this suggestion, and she laughed.

Nellie frowned slightly; this levity jarred upon her in

the wife of the man to whom she wished so well.

"And supposing you knew, without the trouble of watching?" she said.

Nellie looked her straight in the face.

"I wonder you can laugh," she said, in a low voice; "if you really care for him!"

Persis stared into her face half mockingly.

"You're in love with him!"-she said, with decision.

Nellie grew red.

"Am I?" she said. "I don't know. Perhaps I am."

Persis was for a moment struck dumb.

"Perhaps you are!" she repeated, after a pause. "Do

you really mean that?"

"I think so. If you mean by 'in love' admiring and liking a person very much, more than any other almost, and feeling grateful to him besides, well, then, I am in love with your husband, Lady Alford. So, if you think me so attractive a person that he's in danger of falling in love with me, I should advise you to—to look after us both!"

The girl's honest bluntness touched Persis, who, frivolous and selfish as she was, had her good qualities, though they

were seldom seen.

She looked straight into the girl's face for a few moments, and then said suddenly, in quite a different voice, without the least touch of impertinence or suspicion—

"I believe you're a good girl; I really do. If you are, child, keep away from the Hall lot; they'll do you no good. And if you are in love with Lord Alford—which I don't believe, for I think you're too clever for him—why, then, fall out again. It's the best thing you can do."

And without saying any more, she gave Nellie a nod of farewell and let herself out of the room and out of the house

223

in her usual whirlwind fashion, leaving Nellie on the verge of an outbreak of tears.

And so this was Lord Alford's wife—this woman whose every word betrayed that she had scarcely any heart. The girl felt keenly the tragedy of the marriage that was no marriage, and told herself that this was the real cause of all that was wrong in his way of life, of the wild waste, of the impending downfall.

His marriage and her own father's crime had combined to be the ruin of the young Earl's career.

And Nellie felt vaguely that in the passionate pity and remorse she felt there was some hidden danger, both for herself and for him.

In the mean time she knew nothing of the arrangements her father was busily making for her future. While she went on to The Firs in the brand-new motor-car which Alaric Smith had purchased in London three days before, the invalid himself was in Bridger's office, finding answers to the rather curt questions of his old partner.

Bridger wanted to know the meaning of his abrupt departure for London, and of the dashing manner of his return. Smith had his explanation ready. He had sold his "invention," and had received the first sum down on account, and he was full of plans for his daughter's enjoyment and his own.

Bridger looked askance at the mention of the "invention," but he scarcely dared to be openly incredulous.

"I dare say you can let me have that hundred pounds back then, Smith, that I lent you. I'm none too well off just now, and——"

"You shall have it at once," replied Alaric Smith, promptly. "And a second hundred by way of interest on your money, if you want it."

Joel Bridger was impressed, envious, angry.

"You're doing well," he said briefly.

"And what I make I'm ready to share with my friends,"

replied Smith, blandly. "There's nothing would please me better, Bridger, than to see your son and my daughter make a match of it."

"She doesn't seem inclined that way," said Bridger, without thinking.

Smith glanced at him quickly and saw the tell-tale con-

fusion on his late partner's face.

"She may change her mind," said he. "Bring your son out to dine with us next Sunday, and we'll see how the land lies."

Bridger was willing enough to accept this suggestion, and Alaric Smith rose to go. He had already engaged a fly, which was waiting for him at the door.

When he reached The Firs, he was met at the gates by Gustavus Moon, who was in a state of high irritation, having been snubbed by both the Countess and Nellie within the last half-hour. The young man was, indeed, so much put out by the misfortunes which seemed to be accumulating on his head, by his continual disappointments and vexations, that the sight of Alaric Smith in his brand-new clothes, with a diamond pin in his necktie, inflamed him beyond endurance.

If this old rascal had really disposed of the Countess's diamond, and was enjoying himself on the proceeds, then Moon felt that there is no justice in this world.

But had he sold it? Or was he living "on the bounce?" A diamond of immense value is not a thing that you can sell to the first comer, and Alaric Smith having been away no more than a week, could not have travelled far with his wares.

On the whole, Moon was inclined to think that he might yet be safe from this crowning grief. And a way of deciding the point by means of the replica he carried in his pocket occurred to him.

Following Alaric Smith into the house, where Nellie had superintended the preparation of a late luncheon for the invalid, Moon whispered in his ear—



225

"I want to show you something. Come in here."

And seizing the invalid by the arm with less gentleness than usual, he drew him into the drawing-room, shut the door, and thrusting his hand deep down into one of his own pockets, said—

"Guess what I've found!"

Alaric Smith turned deathly white. Then he tried to laugh.

"I'm sure I don't know," he said; "what is it?"

"That!"

Moon whipped the big crystal out of his pocket and laid it upon the table. It flashed in the sunshine that was streaming through the window. Alaric Smith drew back, uttered a stifled sound like a death-cry, and stretched out a trembling hand towards the table.

"How-did you find it?"

The words burst from his pale lips with an effort. Moon seized the crystal, thrust it into his pocket, and clutching the older man by the throat, hissed into his ear these words—

"Go halves; swear to go halves, or—I split!"

And his grasp tightened on the thin throat of the returned convict as he spoke.



CHAPTER XXIV

For a moment Alaric Smith struggled in the grasp of the younger man; he put up his thin hands and fought to release himself from Moon's grip. But his assailant had the advantage of being much taller than he, as well as younger and stronger, and the contest was too unequal to last long.

"Help! help!" cried he.

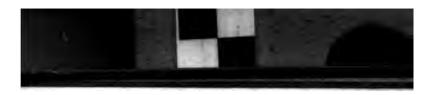
But the fingers pressing on his throat prevented his voice from being heard in its full power, such as it was. And the word was scarcely more than a hoarse moan.

"Swear, swear to keep your word to me. Swear to go halves with me, as you promised. Swear, or I'll give information. Do you think your paltry story of an invention takes me in? I'll not wait your pleasure any longer. Give me my rights. Tell me where you've hidden the diamond, and I'll let you go. I'll let you enjoy yourself. I'll help you. I'll deal fairly by you. But treat me as you've been doing, lead me a dog's life while you go swelling about the country like a prince, and, by Jove! I'll put a stop to your goings on altogether. Do your hear? Do you hear?"

Apparently Alaric Smith did not hear. For his head sank suddenly forward, his gurgling cries ceased, and he fell, limp and nerveless, against the man whose hands were at his throat.

"Do you hear?" repeated Moon, shaking him as he spoke.

But there was no response, and he grew nervous.



227

Relaxing his grasp suddenly, he was struck with horror when Alaric Smith, instead of standing up and answering him, fell in a heap on the floor at his feet, without a movement, without a cry.

"Good Heavens! Have I killed him?"

As the words escaped from his trembling lips, Moon went down on his knees beside the prostrate body, turned it so that the face was uppermost, and stared down at the white cheeks and open mouth with horror in his own heart.

Not only did he see himself accused of the murder of this man, but he saw himself also bereft of all chance of recovering the lost diamond; and at that moment the latter misfortune seemed to the excited and needy adventurer the greater of the two.

He loosened Smith's necktie, and placed the diamond pin, not without an envious look, carefully on the table. But still the prostrate man did not stir. Moon ran to the door and called to Nellie. She was waiting in the diningroom, and was in a state of considerable agitation, as some faint sounds from the adjoining apartment had betrayed to her the fact that some sort of altercation was going on between her father and the younger man.

"What is it?"

The words died away on her lips when, entering the room and seeing her father lying at full length on the floor, she thought, as Moon had done, that he was dead.

"What have you done to him?"

"Nothing-nothing."

She was on her knees already, and, quicker of eye than the man, she saw at once that the worst had not happened.

"It's all right," she said. "Bring me a glass of water."

The moment Moon went out of the room Alaric Smith opened his eyes, stared at his daughter without speaking, and then turned his head and appeared to be listening.

"Are you better now?"

He made no answer, but stared fixedly at the door, which burst open a moment later to admit Moon, with a glass of water in one hand and a decanter of brandy in the other.

But the invalid pushed away the offered glass, and

staring fixedly at Moon, said in a low, broken voice-

"Who is that? Is it the warder? Tell him I'm coming—coming directly."

Both Moon and Nellie uttered an exclamation of horror. It was plain that Smith's mind was wandering, and Moon told himself, with rage and despair, that it was probably his own rash action in attacking the broken-down man which had brought about this catastrophe.

"Go for a doctor, please," said Nellie, in a low voice. "Don't alarm the servants. I'll manage him till you get

back."

But Moon showed the greatest reluctance to leave the room. If his own indiscreet attack had really been the means of turning the brain of the ex-convict, it was almost certain that, his disordered mind being full of the subject which had been the cause of the attack, he would presently begin to babble about it, and would in all probability let fall some word which would lead to the discovery of the place where he had hidden the Countess's diamond.

"I think," said he, "that I had better send one of the servants. You may want a strong arm to help you if he should get violent."

Nellie made a gesture of impatience. Probably she guessed his motive.

"Well, send quickly then," she said.

Without leaving the room, Moon called to one of the maids, who was waiting in the hall with anxiety in her face, and gave the message, taking care to keep one eye all the time upon the interesting invalid.

For some minutes Alaric Smith lay silent on the floor, resisting feebly and with a vacant look every attempt made

to move him into a more comfortable position.



229

"Leave me alone," said he at last, in a hoarse whisper. "I can see the sea from here. And the ships."

Gustavus Moon frowned. Smith seemed to think himself again in prison, and while his thoughts ran on his life as a convict it seemed little likely that he would refer to the hiding-place of the diamond.

"Try and bring him back to where he is; to you, and to—to his new motor-car," suggested Gustavus Moon,

struck with a happy thought.

Still Alaric Smith stared at the ceiling, and murmured incoherently about the governor and his hopes of speedy release. As for Nellie, she felt too suspicious of Moon and his motives to accept his suggestion, and contented herself with putting a cushion under her father's head, and with holding his hand in hers and watching his face for any sign of a change.

But there came none. He did not speak to her, or look at her, and he lay there at full length on the floor, apparently unconscious of the fact that he was not alone.

Moon fidgeted about, and grew more and more anxious. If Smith should not come back to himself, but should lie with his mind wandering until the doctor came, might there not be a grave danger that he would be sent away to an asylum where he could be looked after better than was possible at home?

In that case whatever precious indications he might let fall concerning the hidden diamond would drop on ignorant

or unworthy ears.

The terror in the adventurer's eyes grew stronger every moment. He felt that this might be his last chance of discovering the grand secret, and he hovered closer and closer to the unconscious man, hoping against hope that his wandering mind would revert to something practical, instead of wasting its energies in vapid reminiscence of the old convict days.

"Try to rouse him. I'm sure he ought to be roused l"

cried poor Moon, coming nearer and nearer, and betraying his anxiety in haggard eye and trembling limb. "Smith, my poor fellow, don't you know us? Don't you know your daughter? Don't you know you are at The Firs, where your treasure is, eh? The Firs, The Firs, you remember, don't you?"

He felt that his own words were rash, inasmuch as Nellie probably understood the drift of them. But he was getting desperate, and, after all, at the worst he could deal

with a girl !

Alaric Smith appeared not to hear him.

"I wish," said Nellie, nervously, "you'd let him rest, There's a look coming over his face that I don't like to see. Do let him be quiet."

But the words roused Moon's curiosity, and he bent down to look at the ex-convict's pale face. It did look different, as she had said. The eyes were now closed; the lips were tightly pressed together; there was an expression of intense pain, whether physical or mental he could not tell, in the frowning brows and the drawn features.

"Smith!" cried he again.

Before he could draw back, before he could prepare for resistance, before, indeed, he had the least notion of what was in store for him, Moon found himself suddenly clutched in a fierce grip, pulled down on the floor and rolled over on his back on the carpet, where he lay for a moment defenceless, while the invalid, with surprising energy, rained heavy blows upon his head and his chest.

"The warder! Down with him! Down with him!"

cried Smith, hoarsely.

Nellie, in fresh terror, called in vain upon her father to desist. Moon, furious yet unable to pay out his assailant in the way he felt he deserved, had to content himself with scrambling away as best he could from the clutches of Smith, who, even after he had relaxed his blows, clung to the other, calling him a vile rascal of a warder,



231

and entreating his fellow-convicts to help him in getting his revenge.

Nellie stood back, not attempting to do more than utter a faint protest, "Father! father!" Perhaps, indeed, she secretly enjoyed the sight of the attack made by her father upon Moon.

When at last the younger man freed himself from the frantic clutches of the elder, he was flushed and frightened, and almost inclined to take Nellie's earnestly given advice to go away for a little while, until her father should have recovered his lost memory.

"I'm quite sure I can manage him better than anybody," she urged. "I think your presence irritates him a little, don't you? He takes you for somebody else all the time."

She was hanging, as she spoke, over the arm of the deepseated chair, into which she had coaxed her trying patient, who now lay back with his eyes closed, apparently dead to the world and its affairs. No one would have guessed, to look at the placid features, the restful posture, that a few moments before he had been belabouring one of his fellowmen in a transport of rage.

Moon looked at the invalid, and shook his head. He felt that now was his best chance of learning the secret, and he dared not give it up.

"You'll want some one to sit up with him," he said.
"He is not himself. It would frighten you if he were to wander in his mind in the night. For your sake, if not for his, I must stay."

Nellie did not thank him. She just bowed her head in unwilling acquiescence, and waited for the doctor to come.

Fortunately, Alaric Smith's strength seemed to have been exhausted by his encounter with Moon; and although he muttered something about "enemies" and "warders" under his breath from time to time, he gave no further trouble before the arrival of Dr. Tamworth, an alert,

black-bearded man in the forties, whose black eyes gleamed behind gold spectacles.

He at once ordered that the patient should be taken up to his own room and put to bed. Moon volunteered his assistance, which was vehemently refused by the patient, without words, but with gestures significant of the most

intense loathing.

Then there was a long pause, during which Nellie, who had remained in the drawing-room with the crestfallen Moon, listened to the movements in the room above with the utmost apprehension. She sprang up and ran to the door when she heard the doctor coming downstairs.

"Don't be alarmed. I really think there is no great cause for it," said he, cheerfully, as he came into the room, holding up his right hand to enforce attention to his words. "He is evidently in weak health, is nervous and irritable; but the brain trouble will disappear, I think, with a good night's rest. I am going to send him a soothing draught, which you, Miss Smith, will see that he takes at once. And you, sir," he went on, turning to Moon with decision, "had better leave the house for the present."

"Leave the house! But I'm his right hand, his greatest friend!" stammered the young man, in consternation.

"Exactly. That is why I can count upon your doing what is best for him. He does not know you; he has an idea you are some one else, some one whose presence is disturbing, and therefore I say, for his sake, go away until he has recovered. When he is himself again, he will be delighted to see you, as you will be to know that your prompt tact has conduced to his recovery."

Gustavus Moon would have argued the point, but Dr. Tamworth would not admit of argument. He stood with his hand outstretched to bid the young man farewell, and to see him out of the house.

Unable to devise an excuse for staying which would be accepted either by the doctor or by Nellie, Moon took his



233

leave, very stiffly, very grimly, with a feeling that he had once more been duped by the wily Smith.

Was he really as ill as he had seemed? Was his mind indeed unhinged? Never before had he uttered such wild accusations of the warders as he had poured forth that day; never had he expressed a wish to attack them.

Thinking over his next step, and now satisfied upon one point, namely, that the big diamond was still in Smith's possession, Moon turned over in his mind a project for again utilizing the duplicate which he had already employed to so much advantage.

The second victim was to be Bridger. If he could only persuade him that the crystal in his pocket was what Smith had been hiding, in the belief that it was the real stone! The lawyer, once off the scent, would relax his own share in the pursuit, and leave the way clear for Moon himself to profit alone by the happy chance which might sooner or later put the Countess's diamond into his hands.

At any rate, the little trick was worth trying. Moon thrust his hand into the pocket where he had placed the crystal.

It was not there!

He stopped short in the middle of the road, his forehead wet and cold with fear. He understood now the meaning of that wild clutching and clawing of Alaric Smith's. During that frantic struggle he had no doubt whatever that Smith had possessed himself of the crystal, and he could have gnashed his teeth at the thought that this well-timed attack of insanity had enabled Smith to shake himself free from the presence of the man who had wanted him to go shares in the stolen property.

CHAPTER XXV

Doctor Tamworth smiled cheerfully at Nellie when Moon had gone.

"I think I got rid of him very nicely, don't you?" he

said.

There was a shrewd twinkle in the doctor's eyes, and the girl answered hesitatingly, wondering what he knew.

"Does my father really think he is some one else?"

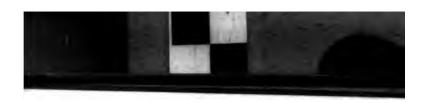
she asked.

"I don't know. But he seemed very anxious to get him out of the house, so I made the best excuse I could."

Nellie sighed involuntarily. She had strong suspicions about her father's surprisingly sudden attack of insanity, and had very little fear that he would be troubled with another. At any rate, she was glad to be free from the presence of Moon, whom she could not but look upon as an artful and unscrupulous adventurer, agreeable though he could be when he pleased.

On the other hand, her dread of her father was by this time even greater than her affection and pity for him; the stern reserve in which he wrapped himself, his apparent insensibility to anything but his own interest and his own enjoyment, made her life with him one long silent fight between conflicting instincts.

She had pictured to herself a life in which her patient devotion should undermine his resentment, until the day would come when she would take him by storm and persuade him to that final act of restitution, which would



235

do so much for the generous young Earl, and ease his own conscience at the same time.

With passionate regret she had to admit that this prospect seemed hopeless; she had not even dared as yet to let him know that she had met Lord Alford. And as for working upon his feelings as she proposed, how could she begin, when he did not seem to have any?

"Is he quiet now?" asked she of the doctor.

"Perfectly. I'll go up and see him again before I go; we'll go together. And I will come in again this evening. In the mean time I will send him the draught I spoke of. But if you keep him quiet I think you will have no further trouble."

Nellie thought the same when she saw her father, who was lying back on his pillows with an expression on his face in which she detected complete satisfaction.

And when the doctor had left, and she was left nominally on the watch in the room with the invalid, the poor girl felt a qualm of dismay when she recognized that this latest trick of her father's had made her more lonely than ever.

For he did not discuss the situation; he did not want to be talked to, or read to, or entertained in any way. The doctor's instructions that he was to be kept quiet suited him admirably. He enjoyed himself in bed exactly as he had enjoyed himself out of it, smoking cigar after cigar, and eating and drinking with keen appreciation the delicacies he had carefully provided.

Alaric Smith did not even seem to notice the sad face of his daughter, or the timidity which marked her manner whenever she had to speak to him. Sometimes, indeed, it seemed to her that he eyed her with a kind of resentment, as if he considered that she was not in all respects the child of his dreams; but as he said nothing, she was careful not to challenge him to speech which might have had disconcerting results for her.

So that day passed and the next, and the only breaks in

the monotony were occasioned by the visits of the doctor, who was always cheerful and delighted with his patient's progress, and those of Moon, who was affectionately solicitous in his inquiries, but much depressed by the intelligence that Mr. Smith was not allowed to see anybody yet.

On the morning of the third day the patient got a letter from Joel Bridger, expressing the hope that his old partner was better, and asking whether the invitation for the follow-

ing Sunday was to stand.

This letter was received on the Friday.

Mr. Smith chuckled softly to himself, and called his daughter, who was sitting as usual by the open window with her needlework.

"Bridger and his son want to come to dine here on Sunday," said he. "In fact, I invited them. You don't want them, I suppose?"

"I don't mind their coming at all, father, unless you'd rather not have them here. Perhaps it would cheer you up

to have some one to talk to."

"There's nothing less likely to cheer me up than talking to either of those two hungry rascals," replied Alaric Smith, with decision. "Both Bridger and Moon are hanging about hugging to their silly hearts the belief that the cat is going to pull the chestnuts out of the fire for them to eat. But he isn't!"

And the invalid suddenly burst into a sardonic laugh which he stifled under the bedclothes.

Nellie shivered. Dared she say anything? Another look at the dry, wrinkled face, as it emerged from the shelter of the sheets, at the wicked twinkle of the brown eyes, the hard lines round the mouth, confirmed her resolution to be silent.

"All the same," went on Smith, recovering his composure, and speaking with some irritability, "they are a nuisance, and one that has to be borne. The thing is to

237

mitigate it as much as possible, and to keep up their hopes by playing off the one against the other, until the moment comes when they can both be dropped altogether."

Nellie could bear it no longer. Starting to her feet, she

cried in a ringing voice-

"Why do you do this, father? Is it worth the worry, the risk, the shame?"

Even as she spoke she felt that the wave of her passion fell against a rock. Alaric Smith's face, hard before, grew harder still as he looked and listened.

"Of course it's worth while," he said dryly. "A man doesn't spend seven years where I've spent them without having had plenty of time to consider such points. Don't be foolish, please. And don't use such words to me as risk and shame. I don't know what they mean—now."

He was as hard as iron. Every word grated upon her; and if it had not been for the secret hope she persisted in cherishing, that she might be able to find the diamond or to prevent its misuse, the girl would have been inclined to forsake the father whom she now dreaded.

She had sense enough to see that, for the time, further appeal was worse than useless. So she forced down every indication of the feelings which excited her, and busied herself with trifling matters, the smoothing of his pillows, the rearrangement of the papers and match-boxes on the table by his side, without more words.

It was her father who broke the silence.

"Bridger wants you to marry his son, and you don't want to marry him, I hear?" he said suddenly.

"I think it was the father who wanted the marriage.

Certainly it was not Bram or I."

"Well, you'd better be civil. And to Moon too. If you could manage to let them both think they had a chance with you, it would fill up the time very well for the next few months, and give me leisure to sell this house, on the quiet, and to prepare for going away."

"Going away !"

"Yes. What do you say to a voyage to America—eh? Where the millionaires come from!"

Nellie felt cold at the thought. She was lonely enough here, but the idea of going away from England, with no company but her father and his guilty secret, was intolerable. She dared not refuse to go, but she at once made up her mind that, when the time came, she would, if the worst came to the worst, make her father choose between giving up his diamond or giving up his daughter.

Unhappily, she could feel no doubt whatever as to the

choice he would make.

"Well," said he sharply, "what's the matter? Why don't you answer? Why do you look so glum? Has the Old World treated either of us so well that we shouldn't be more than ready to try what the New can do?"

"I don't think I want to travel," said Nellie, guardedly.

"What you want doesn't so much matter as what I want, does it?" he retorted dryly. "Remember, I've gone through a martyrdom, which entitles me to be spoilt for the short remainder of my days. And to spoil my daughter too," he added, with a little softening of his tone.

The girl took courage.

"But you don't spoil me," said she. "You don't do anything that I want."

"Don't I? What do you want me to do?"

She drew a long breath.

"To give up everything, everything—but me," almost sobbed she, scarcely articulate in her passionate excitement, as she seized his hand, and clung to it piteously.

But he snatched it away with a contemptuous and dry

little laugh.

"You are sentimental, my dear. I'm not," he said harshly, though not brutally. "Be reasonable, child. Do you expect a boy to give up a toy after you've thrashed him for taking it? You may take it from him—if you can; but



239

you can't expect, when you have given him three pounds' worth of punishment for three-ha'porth of wrong-doing, to find him in a meek and forgiving and yielding spirit, now can you?"

He was so caustic, so dry, above all so strongly convinced of the truth of what he said, that poor Nellie felt herself, for the moment, unprovided with sufficiently powerful arguments to meet his.

As a matter of fact, he did not wait for any, if she had had them. Chuckling softly to himself, he waved her away from him, and saying musingly, "I should like a fried sole, nicely browned, and a glass of sherry for my luncheon," he turned over and took up the morning paper.

She felt that she must go on now that she had dared to begin. Not heeding his plain hint that he considered the subject done with, she said, in a clear voice—

"Father, I want to tell you something about Lord Alford, something which will make you feel towards him very differently."

But she was shocked and amazed at the effect of her words. Putting down his paper, her father turned to look at her, and, with a face convulsed with passion, said, between his clenched teeth—

"If you dare so much as to mention his name to me again I'll have you turned out of the room."

"But——"

He sprang up in bed, gesticulating frantically.

"Go out!" cried he; "go out! I won't hear you. By Heaven, I'll have you attend to what I say, or——"

He had seized the bell-rope that hung by the bedside, and she saw that he was on the point of fulfilling his threat.

Turning away in despair, she said, "I'm going;" and, with more hopelessness than ever at her heart, she left the room.

It was the first time that her father had ever been violent in his manner-towards her, and she began to realize

for how little she counted with him. The knowledge gave her a fresh pang. In spite of his neglect, she had nourished the belief that he was as fond of her as ever, and that it was only the power of demonstrating his affection which had deserted him during those long years of confinement. Now she felt utterly alone; she crept out of the house to think out her position, asking herself whether she was bound any longer to go on sharing his life in the full knowledge that they were both living on other people's money.

She kept away from his room all that day, and he never

once asked for her.

It was late that night, after she had gone to her room, when Nellie heard a noise in the hall below, and, knowing that the servants had gone to bed, she lit a candle and went downstairs to find out the cause.

Accustomed as she was to strange sights and sounds, she uttered an exclamation of amazement on seeing her father, in his dressing-gown, in the act of listening at the front door.

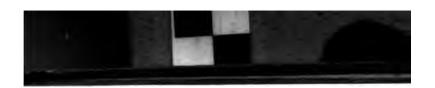
Was he going out? Or was he going to let some-

body in?

Shading her candle with her hand, Nellie, who was by this time only a few feet away from him, waited to see what was going to happen. Alaric Smith turned round quickly, saw his daughter, and rushing at her like a maniac, seized her roughly by the shoulder, dragged her to the door, and opening it, thrust her outside without a word, and shut it in her very face.

Nellie's heart seemed to stand still.

Surely, surely he must be mad after all!



CHAPTER XXVI

In the middle of the gravelled drive in front of the house Nellie stood shivering, more with consternation than with cold, wondering what this treatment meant.

The candlestick was still in her hand, though the candle had fallen to the ground and been extinguished when her father thrust her out of the house. She could hear him in the hall still, moving about softly, and then she heard the front door rattle as if he had hurled himself against it.

What was he doing?

That first thought that he was mad she did not long entertain. Insanity was, indeed, the malady of all others the least likely to attack that quietly determined, selfish, reserved man, perfectly consistent in all his actions, the man who had laid down a plan for his life, and who meant to carry it out at all hazards, and in the face of all difficulties.

This was her view of her father as he now was. She felt as sure that he would foil all these greedy adventurers who wanted to share his ill-gotten gains, as if they had been so many pigmies battling against a giant. That he should turn even upon her now that she had dared to utter a word in defence of those whom he considered his enemies was, she felt, consistent too.

Now that he looked upon her as a partisan of the other side, she must be whistled off like the rest.

This was what she thought, and the consciousness of her forlorn situation growing stronger and stronger, she uttered a stifled sob as she turned towards the drive, thinking she

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would get good Mrs. Barr to give her shelter till the morning.

But before she had taken more than half a dozen steps down the drive, she was startled by a voice from the bushes behind her, crying—

"Miss Nellie! Miss Nellie! Where are you going

at this time of night? Is your father ill?"

She stopped, almost relieved to hear the voice, although

she recognized it as that of Gustavus Moon.

She was glad to think that, whatever he had been doing outside the house so late, he had not seen her father turn her out-of-doors.

"He doesn't seem to be quite himself," stammered she.

"I'm going to Mrs. Barr."

Moon was clever enough to guess that it was not illness, but some other cause, which had sent the girl wandering so late. This seemed a very good opportunity to ingratiate himself with her; and it was a maxim of his that civility to a girl is its own reward. Besides, though many an ugly doubt about the big diamond had by this time risen in his mind, it seemed certain that Smith had it in his keeping; and if he should die without being made to disgorge, Nellie would inherit all he had to leave.

Moon had, besides, that easy good nature which dislikes the sight of a woman's tears; and though Nellie did not actually cry, she looked as if it would need very little to make her do so.

So that it was with a very attractive gentleness that he said, coming nearer to her, and bending his head to speak low—

"I hate to see you looking so worried. He'll get over this attack, be sure of it. His constitution is better than they think."

Nellie bowed her head in assent. They were walking

towards the lodge. Suddenly she stopped.

"What were you doing here, Mr. Moon?" she asked abruptly.

243

Here was an opportunity.

"I was hanging about, as I generally am now, Miss Nellie, on the chance of your wanting some assistance."

"Really?"

"Yes. What would you do if your father had another attack in the night, for instance, such as perhaps he's on the verge of now?"

"Oh, I'm not afraid of that."

"But I am afraid for you. Your life is a martyrdom. You have no one to talk to; no companions of your own age and sex, like other girls. Miss Nellie, if there were anything I could do for you, I should be so glad, so very, very glad."

The words brought those ever-ready tears to the girl's eyes. Little as she trusted him, she found a sort of spurious comfort in listening to these expressions of a sympathy which was not, indeed, wholly artificial. Nellie was a pretty girl, and Moon had that sort of surface good nature which dislikes to see a woman look unhappy.

"Thank you," she said. "I'm afraid there's not much any one can do for me; and I dare say my own troubles are not so much worse than those of other people as I like

to think they are."

Thus checked in her progress towards the lodge, Nellie had turned back again, and they were now standing within sight of the house, the front door of which Nellie now saw to be open. Probably Alaric Smith was listening, for they suddenly saw his face appear in the aperture, and heard him calling impatiently—

"Nellie, is that you? Come here, come back here. I

want you."

"Shall I come with you?" asked Moon, only too delighted at the excuse to force himself into the house.

"No, better not," said she, with decision. "He might shut the door again unless I went back alone."

"All right. Good night. Remember what I said.

When you want my services, I shall never be very far away."

He held out his hand, and she gave him hers with a sort of feeling that she could scarcely do less. But she was unprepared for the enthusiasm with which he seized it, and pressed it to his lips, and she withdrew it as quickly as she could, with shame and dismay at the unwelcome demonstration.

Running quickly to the open door, she was dragged in by her father, who then immediately shut and bolted it, as if afraid that his fortress might be stormed. Nellie was subdued, frightened, wondering what he was going to say to her, and afraid of some outbreak of fresh anger. She was taken by surprise when he led her with the utmost gentleness into the drawing-room, and, lighting the candles on the mantelpiece, pointed to a chair, and said, with a smile which recalled the old days of her childhood—

"Sit down, my dear. I'm afraid I alarmed you a little while ago. But it was all a mistake. I was taken by surprise; I had thought you were in bed, and I acted too hastily—much too hastily."

He came towards her, and caressed her head with the utmost kindness. His whole manner, indeed, had undergone a great change. She had never, since his return, seen him so kindly, so human. For the moment his stony reserve seemed to be broken down, and there was a look of satisfaction, almost of triumph, in his brown eyes, which made her wonder again what his strange night's work had been.

"Was that young Moon you were talking to out there?" he asked, not dictatorially, but in the same genial manner.

"Yes."

He laughed to himself.

"I thought so. He is hanging about in the hope of making himself agreeable to the heiress. Oh yes, don't

245

look astonished. You will be a very well-dowered young woman when the sale of my invention is completed. But I want you to look higher than Moon—much higher. Over there in the New World, where we're going, we shall pick up some dollars, and then I mean to bring you back and start you in life, with every luxury, every extravagance even, that you can wish for."

"There's nothing I care for less, father."
He waved his hand, and laughed again.

"You think so now. But the taste will grow upon you; I mean that it shall. If you don't care for handsome dresses and jewellery on your own account, I mean that you shall care on mine. Because you love me, and are sorry for what I've gone through, you shall consider my tastes and my wishes, and you shall dress like a princess, and hold your own in the smartest of the smart set, just to please your poor old father's vanity. Why, my girl, what should I care for luxury and money but for you? What has the world to give me in comparison with what it has for you? Child, you must care for these things, as I say, not for your own sake, but for mine."

She seemed to be witnessing for the first time a revelation of the inner man of this mysterious human being who had been like a stranger to her. She saw flashing in his eyes the pent-up ambition of years; she heard in his voice the triumph of assured fulfilment of long-cherished schemes. Cowed, shocked, she dared not check or thwart him, but listened, without enthusiasm, indeed, but with submission, as he went on in the same strain, enjoying in advance the social triumphs which were to be hers, the pleasures and excitements which were to make him happy in her happiness, and successful in her success.

So she sat there, with her head bent, moving it in reluctant apparent assent from time to time, clasping her hands tightly, and acutely miserable while trying to appear sufficiently elated with the prospect not to irritate or annoy him.

But when at last he let her retire, and she shut herself into her own room, the one thought in her mind was how to escape from the false position he was making for her, to avoid the shame of living in luxury and enjoyment on the property of Lord Alford.

The invention she did not believe in for one moment,

any more than Moon and Bridger had done.

On the following morning she found her father downstairs before her, and just as alert and bright as he had been on the previous night. He ordered the motor-car to be brought round, and insisted on taking Nellie for a drive, and in going in the direction of Heynes Hall.

He sat beside the chauffeur, and she in the seat behind; and she was in a tremor of dread all the while lest they should meet any of the party from Lord Alford's, as they were almost bound to do, since the Earl's guests were riding and driving about the neighbourhood all day long.

When they came in sight of the stately old mansion, Alaric Smith turned round to his daughter, with a look of savage satisfaction on his face.

"That man," said he, "who has no mercy for others,

will soon be in the gutter."

With an indescribable pain at her heart, Nellie heard this speech without daring to protest or to answer. His virulence was shocking, unmeasured, not to be argued away.

"Don't let us go further this way, father," was all she dared to whisper. "It wouldn't be in very good taste to pass the place, would it?"

The words were scarcely out of her mouth when she saw, not a hundred yards away, a phaeton coming towards them down the road, which was narrow, and at this point bordered by overhanging hedges. With dismay she recognized Lord Alford himself on the driver's seat, and touching her father, she whispered imploringly—

"Let us turn back."

He made no answer, but by the impatient gesture with



247

which he rebuked her, she knew that the meeting was inevitable.

What would Lord Alford do? She set her teeth and watched him. She saw him glance casually at the car and then at his horse, a spirited animal, young and unused to the trials of the road. Then, as he came nearer, she saw that he recognized her, and wondered what was going to happen.

The phaeton came closer; it was alongside. Lord Alford raised his hat, cried, "How do you do?" as he passed, and smiled at her, as he always did.

Her father did not turn round, did not move, did not say another word to her during the drive. But she knew that the storm was coming, and when they got back home it came.

Leading the way in without a word, Alaric Smith opened the drawing-room door, and with an imperious gesture signed to his daughter to go in. Then he followed, shut the door, and, turning to her with a face full of suppressed passion, said, under his breath—

"What was the meaning of it?"

"Of what?"

"You know. Of Lord Alford's speaking to you."

"He knows me; he saved my life. He jumped into the sea at Bay View and pulled me out, when I was so miserable that I tried to drown myself. He and his aunt took me to Heynes Hall, and were as kind to me as it is possible to be. I shall be grateful to them, to him, as long as I live."

She dared not look at him as she spoke, but hurried out her words, anxious to get her confession done with, and to meet the expected storm.

But he took her confession in stony silence, broken at last by a short exclamation of incredulity and disgust.

"You thought yourself justified in receiving the kindness of the man who had caused your father to suffer seven years of torture?" said he dryly, at last.

She made no answer. Alaric Smith walked up and down the room, and at last stopped short and faced her. He looked harder than ever as he stared into her face with a piercing look.

"What more has he done for you? Has he given you

presents? Money?" he rasped out sharply.

She hesitated, flushed, replied upon the impatient stamping of his foot, and his short, emphatic injunction, "No lies!"

"He gave me money enough to get to London with. I had none."

There was a flashing fire in his eyes which filled her with terror; but his tone remained hard and dry and cold.

"You had jewels—of your mother's. What has become of those?"

No answer.

"Go and fetch them."

She went out of the room, waited a moment in the hall, and then and there made up her mind. She could not face his anger when he should know the truth; she could not go on with this wretched life of imposture and shame. He was not so ill as he pretended; he could do without her perfectly well. All he cared for was his own enjoyment, and she had become to him only a peg to hang his wrongful ambitions upon.

And the thought of Lord Alford, the shame of knowing that she was being supported in luxury at his expense, wrung the girl's heart.

She opened the front door softly, pulled it to behind her without risking the noise of shutting it, and went quickly away to the right, where there was a short cut to the station.

She had run away.



CHAPTER XXVII

"Why, where are you off to in such a hurry—eh?"
"Oh!"

The first speaker was Lord Alford, and the second Nellie. They had come face to face at the corner, where the lane, which was the short cut to the station, crossed the high-road.

" I—I'm going away."

"Where to?"

"I—I don't know. Bath, in the first place, I suppose."

"You suppose! Of all the irresponsible creatures this mad world ever produced, Nellie, you are the most irresponsible. You're always going off on some wild-goose chase or other, and I'm always the person who seems appointed by Providence to intercept you in your wild career!"

She answered only by a deep-drawn sob. She was not crying, but she was holding herself in with a great effort, which made her words curt and her manner dry. But Lord Alford understood her, and he was not offended. She recognized strangely at that moment the difference there was between the interested good nature of Gustavus Moon and the genuine kindness of the young Earl.

"I had an idea, you know, by the look on your face when I passed you in the motor-car just now, that you were up to something. So I sent the phaeton home, and loafed

about here. If you hadn't turned up like this, I should have gone up to The Firs to ask for you."

"You-wouldn't!" she gasped.

- "Oh, shouldn't I? You don't know me yet. I say, your dear old papa is going it. What a jolly car! And how smart you are! There, there, don't cry again. You really must give up that habit of weeping as soon as one looks at you. Now, Nellie, speak up, and tell me quietly just what has happened. You've had a quarrel with papa. About me, I suppose?"
- "Oh no, no; I don't quarrel with him. He's ill, as you know, and fanciful, and so he doesn't care for me as much as he used."
- "But he's kind to you. He's made you very smart. Why, Nellie, I shouldn't have known you."

And he took a backward step, in mock admiration of the pretty dress and silk motor-cloak she wore.

"I hate these things" said Nellie, angrily. "I don't feel myself in them. I like my old serge frock and my straw hat, and I only wish I had had time to change into the dress I feel at home in."

"No, no; there you're wrong. You look ever so much nicer in those things than you did in your pet serge get-up. I used often to wonder how you'd look in more—more more grown-up things, and I'm quite glad papa has given me a chance of seeing how well you look in them. You would be quite a showy-looking little person, Nellie, if you were to take more care what you wore."

"I certainly don't intend to take more care; I intend to take less," said Nellie, fiercely. "Do you suppose I like being dressed up, and driving about in motor-cars, when I ought to be living in a cottage and earning my own living?"

"Well, don't be so cross with me. It isn't fair."

"I didn't mean to be cross. But I've been living in such a miserable way, always on the watch for something,

251

I don't quite know what, and always waiting for something horrid to happen, that I am always in a sort of fever, and quite incapable of behaving like anybody else."

"You never did behave like anybody else."

She looked at him with surprise. Even while she lingered to talk to him, she knew that she was doing wrong; she had a very distinct impression that the less she saw of Lord Alford the better it would be for everybody; but yet the fascination of his kind manners, of his straightforwardness, of his lively daring which yet was not impertinence, made her stay and talk when she felt that she should be hastening forward.

"Don't I?"

"No. If you did, I dare say I shouldn't take so much interest in you. As it is, you are exciting; you give one the pleasing sensation of never knowing what you will be up to next."

"At present I am up to going to the station."

"Going to London again?"

"Perhaps."

"Don't answer like that. Be straightforward. You've just come from London, I know. You had a rollicking old time there, I suppose?"

"Well, I'm not going to have one now."

"You've run away?"

She hesitated.

"Oh, don't deny it. There was a guilty look on your face, when you turned the corner just now, which gave you away. I guessed that you wouldn't be able to live the life you described very long."

She shuddered.

"It's unbearable," she whispered. "It'isn't as if I could do anything. I used to think I could, but now I see it's hopeless. Lord Alford, you were right. My father is a great deal cleverer than—than anybody else I know."

The Earl laughed, with a sort of triumphant satisfaction,

at his own foresight.

"Of course he is. I told you so. He's one of the 'cutest old rascals—I beg your pardon, but it's the only word—going. He ought to have been a company-promoter. But then, after all, perhaps he prefers taking his punishment first, and enjoying himself afterwards, to the more conventional way, which is, to enjoy life first, and to do time for one's misdeeds as a wind-up. There's something to be said for his choice, when you come to think of it."

By this time Nellie was frankly crying.

"You'll never get your diamond back, Lord Alford."

"Of course I shan't. I never thought I should. My only comfort in the matter is, that our two assiduous friends, Bridger and Moon, will be 'left' as well."

"I wish you wouldn't laugh about it!"

"Do you? Oh, my child, let us laugh while we can. The laughing time won't last long. But come, there's the question of domicile to be considered. Must it really be London, Nellie?"

"I think so."

"Without the least idea where you're going, or what you're going to do?"

The girl hesitated, and caught her breath. Put like

that, the prospect seemed blank indeed.

"It's not quite so bad as that," she said at last. "I have—ideas as to what I am going to do."

He looked at her wistfully.

"I wish I could do something—anything!"

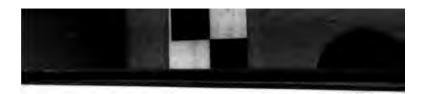
She drew herself up.

"But you can't. I ought not to be talking about what I'm going to do instead of doing it."

And she started off again towards the station, Lord

Alford keeping pace with her.

"Won't your father find out you're gone, and send or come after you?"



253

"That's what I'm afraid of. If I don't catch a train almost as soon as I get to the station, my chances of escape will be very poor."

"I don't think you will catch one at this time in the

day. So few trains stop at these little wayside places."

"Well, I must take my chance. Good-bye."

She was in sight of the station. The Earl took her hand without looking at her. He had a plan in his mind, and he was half afraid that, if she met his eyes, she might guess it.

"Good-bye," he said. "And all good luck go with

you."

He was gone so quickly that her suspicions were roused as to what he meant to do. He went straight across the fields to the village inn, and by the time Nellie arrived at the little station, and found that she had just missed her train, and had two hours and a half to wait, Lord Alford had hired a gig to take him back at all speed to Heynes Hall.

Two hours later, the big carriage from the Hall rumbled up to within a few paces of the station, and Lady Alicia, looking out of it, caught sight of the astonished face of Nellie, who was hiding behind the hedge of the field on

the left.

Lady Alicia beckoned to the girl, who came forward, half timidly, half gladly, from her hiding-place.

"What are you doing there, child?"

Nellie guessed that the old lady had been sent by her nephew, so she said at once—

"I'm waiting for a train; and as there's some one waiting at the station to stop me, I am hanging about here, in the hope of being able to get in at the last moment."

"Come in with me."

Nellie hesitated; the old lady insisted; and the girl gave way.

"Did Lord Alford send you for me?" she asked in a low voice.



"Well, he told me that you were running away from home, and I thought, as we were your best friends, you'd better run to us to begin with, at any rate."

The truth was that, when her nephew had told her of Nellie's flight, the artful Lady Alicia had at once suggested, as he knew she would, that they should offer her at least a temporary shelter. The old lady saw the importance of keeping up communications with The Firs, and was exceedingly anxious to question Nellie as to the state of affairs there.

"It's very kind of you to come for me," said Nellie, as she got into the carriage.

She was in a state of desperation. On the one hand, she had seen Gustavus Moon hanging about the station, and knew that he intended either to waylay or to follow her; on the other, she had to take refuge at Heynes Hall, and risk a great many things.

Of the two evils the latter seemed the less, since she had definitely decided to consider the interests of the Earl before any others.

During the drive Lady Alicia plied her with questions, which, though adroitly put, all pointed to the same thing. She wanted to gain all the information she could about Alaric Smith, his habits and his plans. Nellie had not much to tell, however; though she could trust Lord Alford with all the knowledge at her disposal, she had to be more reticent with his aunt.

It was getting late in the afternoon when they reached Heynes Hall, the sight of which filled the girl with a thousand strange sensations. Lady Alicia made her take off her hat and cloak, and, seeing that she looked very tired, sent her into her own boudoir to rest.

Nellie, who had missed her luncheon, was too shy to say so, but ventured to ask whether she might have a cup of tea brought to her. With a promise to send it, Lady Alicia then went away; and Nellie, who was conscious that she



255

had disappointed the old lady with the meagreness of her information, lay back on the sofa and closed her eyes, feeling unutterably miserable and desolate.

She was roused by Lord Alford's voice, and sitting up quickly, with a deep flush rising to her cheeks, she saw that the Earl himself had brought in her tea, which he had taken from a servant outside the door.

"Oh, thank you; how kind----"

"Rather a neat act of kidnapping, wasn't it?"

"It was your doing, I suppose?"

"Yes. You see, Nellie, I feel a sort of proprietary interest in the little girl I pulled out of the water. If you had had any friends to go to, I should have let you go to London. As it is, it seems better that you should come here until you have settled something, or until you can patch it up with your father."

She shook her head drearily.

"I shan't do that. And—it's rather awkward for me to come here. If he should find out—and he will, for Gustavus Moon will tell him where I am—he will look upon me as a traitress. And then Lady Alford, what will she say? She was not very nice to me when she came to The Firs."

The Earl looked at her in astonishment and anger.

"She came to The Firs! When was this? Tell me all about it."

Nellie grew pale.

"Didn't you know?"

"Of course I didn't. Tell me what she said—tell me just what happened."

"Is she here now?" whispered Nellie.

"No, thank Heaven!"

"Oh, don't say that!"

"I shall say it. I hate the sight of her. Now I see what she came here for a week ago. It was to go and worry you. Oh, Nellie, what did she say?"



"Nothing very dreadful," said the girl, quickly. "I think she meant to be disagreeable when she came, but as I told her the plain truth, she contented herself with warning me not to come here again. So if she were to know I had come, she—she might be——"

"Nasty? Yes, no doubt she would. But what did she say to you? Was she insulting? Did she say anything

to hurt you, child?"

He was sitting in a chair near the sofa, bending forward, with his hands loosely clasped. Nellie thought he looked kinder, handsomer, than he had ever looked before, and there was in her eyes, as she gazed at him while he looked on the floor, such an expression of tender concern that her very heart seemed to be in her eyes.

"Not very much. I told her if she was jealous she

ought to stay here."

He looked up, smiling.

"Did you really say that? You impudent little puss!"

"Oh, I said a great deal more than that!"

"What! Tell me, tell me!"

But Nellie blushed and hesitated. She could not tell him all; and looking up after a moment's pause, she saw him very near her, with a look in his eyes which made her shrink.

"Nellie, Nellie, let her say what she likes. Do you mind? I don't. I say, Nellie, wouldn't you like to snap your fingers at everybody and everything, and to go away, and to be happy, awfully happy, with some one who cared more for you than for anybody else in the world? Would you care what the world said? Would you—"

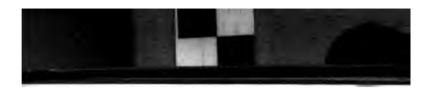
"Stop!"

To his amazement she had suddenly put her hand on his mouth, and was looking at him with eyes of fire.

"How dare you? You!"

He drew back, reddening, and trying to laugh.

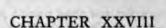
"What do you mean by me?" cried he, defiantly.



257

"I mean," said she, rising and looking at him with a face in which her feeling glowed and shone, making it radiant and beautiful as an angel's, "that you are my hero, Lord Alford, and—that you have got to remain a hero to me."

He rose, too, at the words, and looking into her face with eyes in which she saw both passion and something better, he said under his breath, "All right, child, all right!" patted her on the shoulder lightly, and went quickly out of the room.



Nellie was trembling from head to foot as she sipped her tea, when Lady Alicia came in, with a face full of veiled suspicion and concern.

"You look flushed, my dear. What's the matter?"

she asked. "Has anything happened to annoy you?"

"Oh no; not since I've been here. But I have a good many things to worry me, as you know—my father's ill-health, and my having to go away."

But the old lady came up to her, and looked into her

eyes.

"I hope my nephew has not been saying anything silly to you? You are not one of those foolish girls who listen to flattery, are you?"

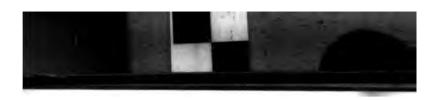
"Lord Alford never does flatter me," answered the girl, gravely and steadily. "And I think too much of him for

him to say anything silly to me."

"That's right. But he's very headstrong, and—and thoughtless for a man of his age; and he gets into the way, with these stage people always about, of saying more than he means."

"He doesn't to me, Lady Alicia; and if he did it wouldn't matter, for I should answer him by saying just what I do mean," said Nellie.

She stayed quietly in Lady Alicia's boudoir till dinnertime, and was quite surprised, when she went downstairs, to find how pleased she was to see the different members she knew of the usual rather noisy house-party.



259

Miss Dawes and her mother; Mrs. Long; old Ned Ferrers and Barrett Browne were all there, and a few others whom she did not know.

Nellie noticed at once a subtle difference in the manner of those of the guests whom she had met before. She was no longer treated as an intruder, on the one hand, or as a person of no consequence on the other.

Mrs. Long, whose manner had sometimes been slightly ofthand, went out of her way to be charming to her; while Miss Dawes was subdued and respectful, and Mrs. Dawes looked at her with undisguised alarm.

"All the women are jealous of you, Miss Smith," whispered old Ned Ferrers to her at the dinner-table. "You've made too great an impression upon Lord Alford for them to look upon you with kind eyes. On the other hand, you'll hear nothing but kind—tongues!"

And the shrewd, genial old fellow gave her a look which was almost a wink.

Nellie looked upon all this with secret scorn. If only they all knew what was going on in her heart, the feverish unrest in which she lived, how their flatteries and their civilities would change on the instant to contempt! Did they know, she wondered, whose daughter she was, and what a beggar-maid's place she really occupied in regard to the Earl?

She was too far from Lord Alford for him to talk to her at the dinner-table; but when the ladies had retired to the Blue Saloon, Mrs. Long came tripping across the room to her with a small fluffy white dog under her arm, and said, wrinkling up her little face into a smile which all but hid her eyes—

"So you've cut us all out, Miss Smith, with the Earl? What marvels you demure young girls can accomplish, to be sure!"

Nellie had more aplomb by this time than she had had on her previous visit. Indeed, this change of scene, and the

merry atmosphere of Heynes Hall, acted as a tonic after the strain and anxiety of the past fortnight.

"Indeed, it is marvellous if I have," she answered

brightly. "What makes you think so?"

Mrs. Long looked at her askance out of those little merry slits of eyes.

"You needn't play innocence with me! Tell me now,

do you mean to make him marry you?"

Nellie burst out laughing. The absurdity of the question seemed to her even greater than its daring impropriety.

"I hadn't thought of it," she said gaily.

Mrs. Long looked slightly offended at this mocking tone. "I hope you're not such a silly girl as not to seize your chance," she said. "He and his wife hate the sight of each other, and though, of course, she doesn't want to give up the title, I know on very good authority that she'd be delighted to give up everything else. So, if you play your cards well, you ought to be able to step into her shoes. And don't be

such a prig, child, as to mind stepping into a little mire on your way to a coronet." "But I should mind it very much indeed," answered Nellie, now as grave as Mrs. Long could wish. "And I

assure you that, if I have laughed at what you've said, it was because I didn't want to show what I really felt. It's shocking to me to hear you say such things. And if you

knew all about my family and the Earl's, you would know how painful it is for me to have to listen."

But Mrs. Long nodded with bright intelligence.

"Oh, I do know. We all know," she said briskly. "But that need not make any difference. The great thing is that your father is rich. We've heard all about the invention that's brought him so much money. And money is just what Lord Alford wants, poor boy!"

Nellie felt that she could scarcely sit still.

"I do beg you, Mrs. Long," she said earnestly, "not to think of such a thing for a moment. Nothing more absurd



26 I

was ever imagined. It seems dreadful to me to have to explain, but I will just say this: even if Lord Alford were a free man, there is no man on earth I wouldn't rather marry."

"Do you mean it?"

"Yes."

Nellie was trembling all over. Mrs. Long looked half incredulous, half disappointed. A shrewd little woman of the world, she knew perfectly well there was no chance for herself, and she would have liked to make friends with the rising star. To find that the star professed not to wish to rise was disconcerting.

"Here comes Lord Alford," she said, suddenly perceiving the Earl on his way across the room. "I wonder what he'd say if I were to tell him what you've just told me!"

"He would laugh as much as I did," said Nellie. But then she added quickly, "But I hope you won't say any-

thing of the sort to him, all the same."

"Of course I won't, child," said Mrs. Long, laying upon the girl's arm a tiny hand, of which the fingers sparkled with rings, and then carrying off her dog to be admired by old Ned Ferrers, who was watching these two from a corner.

It was only natural that Nellie should feel some confusion, after the conversation she had just had with Mrs. Long, and with the remembrance of the episode in the boudoir fresh in her mind. But all such feelings melted away when she saw, by the expression of his face, that he had some serious subject of disquiet in his mind.

Never indeed had she seen him look so grave, so much disturbed, so unlike himself. And his first words communicated his own distress to her.

"You were right, Nellie. That fellow Moon was following you. He has followed you here."

"Oh!"

There was a moment's pause. Then he said restlessly—

"Of course there's no harm in your being here. My aunt brought you. He must have seen that she did."

But Nellie knew that the case was more serious than he affected to think.

"I knew I ought not to have come," she said in a low, frightened voice. "He's glad of the opportunity of making mischief."

"With your father?"

"Yes."

They were both silent for a moment. Then she said-

"You'll let me go away to-morrow morning early, won't you, without letting Mr. Moon know that I've gone? Then, if he rushes back to The Firs with the news, it won't matter!"

"All right. We'll trick Moon, so that he shan't follow you. But you'll let me know where you are, won't you?"

He was winning, persuasive. But she shook her head with decision.

"I'd rather you didn't ask me that. But I promise to write to Lady Alicia if—if I can't get on."

"No, no. What's the good of writing to my aunt? You know I should never hear anything about it. You must write to me. Come, you will, won't you?"

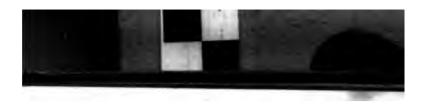
Nellie looked at him swiftly, and then said straightforwardly—

" Yes."

Before he had time to say more the door of the saloon opened, and Gustavus Moon and Barrett Browne came in together. The former came up to Nellie, and Lord Alford retreated a few steps, thinking it better she should hear what Moon might have to say.

Nellie, however, would have avoided a tête-à-tête if she could.

"I hope you'll forgive me for saying so," began the young man at once, before she could escape, "but I'm sorry you've come here. You don't know your best friends, Miss Nellie,



263

or you wouldn't have avoided me to-day and come to Lord Alford's. There'll be a terrible row and scandal when your father finds out where you are."

"I hope he won't find out. But if he does, he's much too clever not to know that I had some good reason for

coming."

"He won't think so. I don't fancy you understand his feeling towards the Cannington family."

"He received Lady Alicia, and it was with her I came here," replied Nellie, quickly.

"There's some one else here besides Lady Alicia."

Nellie was too indignant at the insinuation to answer him. She was turning away, with the intention of crossing the room to Mrs. Long, who was watching her all the while with her cunning little eyes, when Moon stopped her very humbly.

"No, Miss Nellie, don't be so angry. You wouldn't be if you knew how strongly I feel everything where you are concerned. Nobody knows better than I do how innocent and pure your motives are; but you are so independent that you don't consider how your very purity, your very frankness, are a danger. Look at the women here! Are they the sort of people any one who loves you would choose for your companions?"

"Perhaps not. But there's not nearly so much harm in them as such people as the Bridgers think," replied Nellie, with spirit. "If they have one set of faults, quiet people have others. And I can quite understand why Lord Alford likes them, and why even Lady Alicia puts up with them."

Moon felt something like genuine admiration for the girl's fresh way of looking at things. He nodded, smiling.

"Yes, that's quite true," said he; "but it wouldn't do you any good with the quiet people for them to hear you say so. One must make certain sacrifices to the conventions, you know."

"I suppose so."

"It's only people like me, with a spice of Bohemianism about them, who understand the way you look at things, I believe I appreciate you better than anybody, Miss Nellie."

"Do you?"

"Yes. But you never give me credit for it, or for anything," he went on sentimentally. "Yet you were ready to be nice and gracious when your father turned you out. Now that you've got out of your difficulties with him, I can

He was winning, charming, kind. Nellie grew a little

remorseful.

"I don't think that's quite fair," she said. "I'm grateful for anybody's kindness."

"Yes, anybody's except mine."

"That's not true."

"Then if you are really satisfied that I understand you and wish you well, why won't you let me hope?"

"Hope what?" cried she, alarmed.

"Hope that some day I may be more to you than—than anybody. Miss Nellie, I would make you a good husband."

She blushed scarlet and looked at him in horror.

"Oh no," she said; "I don't want anybody to do that!" He drew back offended, and an angry light appeared in his eyes.

"Of course. I know. Lord Alford stands in the way!"

he said brusquely.

Nellie flashed upon him one disdainful look, and turned But she did not feel quite happy. This constant iteration of the Earl's name by everybody began to fill her with uneasiness, and with a sort of helpless alarm. She took refuge from further conversation with Moon in the society of Miss Dawes and Ned Ferrers by the piano, while the young man rejoined the group of which Lord Alford was a member.

He had scarcely done so when a footman came into the room, and going up to the Earl, informed him that there



265

was a man in the hall who had asked for him, and who would not take any excuse.

"A man! What man?" asked Lord Alford, with a shrug of the shoulders, which betrayed his suspicions of the nature of the man's errand.

"An old man, my lord, very lean and shrivelled, and

very much wrapped up."

"Tell him to go to the dev-" The Earl stopped in the middle of the word and said, "No; tell him I'll see him."

And he followed the servant out of the room slowly,

and with a frown on his face.

In the wide hall, where little clusters of electric lights gleamed among trophies of shining armour on the dark wainscotted walls, there stood, leaning on a thick stick and trembling violently, a bent old man.

Scarcely had the footman delivered his message to the stranger and turned to lead the way into a room on the right, when his master met him and signed to him to retire.

At the sound of the Earl's footstep the unknown visitor

stood erect, gasping out in a harsh whisper-

"Lord—Lord Alford!"

The Earl strode forward.

"Ah!" cried he, "it is you, Mr. Smith; I thought so."

"Yes, it's I-I whom you've robbed of seven years or life, whom you would rob of my daughter!"

"I!"

"You! You whom I hate, whom I've sworn to punish. Wretch! brute! take that."

And springing forward with the alertness of a lad, Alaric Smith struck the Earl a heavy blow across the face with his stick, raising a bar of livid flesh across lip and cheek,



Before Alaric Smith could recover his breath, after his violent attack upon the Earl, he found himself lifted off his feet and swung into an antercom on the left, while his stick was taken from him and broken before his eyes.

"What! Would you kill me, you murderous ruffian!" he gasped out, as he found Lord Alford towering over him as he lay sprawling on the bench on which he had been thrown.

"It would be no more than you deserved if I did," retorted the Earl. "But you needn't be afraid. You've escaped justice too often, you rascal, not to have established the right to escape it again. Get up, get up, I say, and leave off those antics. They don't deceive me."

Alaric Smith was gasping and drawing deep breaths, as if in pain.

"It's quite—quite what I expected of you, to try to murder an old man, a man your brutal treatment has made old before his time," said Smith, panting still, but more with

rage than any physical ailment.

"I should advise you to drop all references to your delicate and debilitated state of health," said Lord Alford, dryly, "or it may happen that you will find yourself laid by the heels again, and made to serve the rest of your term, with perhaps a few additional months for the deception you've played upon the prison authorities."

This was a bow drawn at a venture, for the Earl had no more reason than shrewd conjecture for thinking that Smith



267

had managed to cheat the authorities into thinking him nearer death than he in fact was. But the hint had its effect. Smith pulled himself together and sat up on the bench, glowering at his antagonist with evil eyes.

"The prison authorities have learnt that I was wrong-

fully convicted," mumbled Smith.

"Ah!" said the Earl, sarcastically.

"And if I had been guilty, which everybody knows I was not, I should have them all on my side when it was known that you ran away with my daughter."

"Lies!" said the Earl, briefly. "You ought to know your daughter better, and you would if you were more

worthy of her."

Smith drew himself up. He has seen just enough of a half-guilty look on the young man's face to feel that this was his chance.

"Where is she?" he cried. "It's of no use to deny that you know where she is, even if she isn't in this house while

I speak."

"Certainly I know where she is, and most certainly I'm not going to tell you. You're as bad a father as you are a man, and it's your fault that you've made it impossible for your own child to live under the same roof with you. She put up with you as long as she could; she obeyed you, she nursed you, and you had no more gratitude for her kindness and forbearance than you had for other people's."

Alaric Smith glared at him steadily while these words

were being hurled at him. Then he said sullenly—

"Forbearance! It's I have shown forbearance. Where is she, I say?"

"I shall not tell you."

"You dare to keep a young girl away from her parent, her protector? I'll make you give her up. I'll go before a magistrate——"

"I don't think you will," said the Earl, scornfully.

"What do you mean by your sneers? Because I've

been in prison, thrown there by you and your rascally guardians, you think you have a right to taunt me."

"Not at all. That fact makes me forbearing. Your daughter has gone away, helped on her journey by my aunt, Lady Alicia Cannington, and that must be enough for you. At any rate, that's all the information you will get from me."

"I insist---"

Lord Alford interrupted him with sudden anger,

"You will insist upon nothing. You have no right. Now go. Here is your stick. Get it mended if you can, and employ it better another time than in assaulting the people you have robbed."

"Robbed! Do you mean-"

"Go out."

The door was open, and the Earl pointed to the front door, by which a footman was standing.

Alaric Smith was cowed. He made one more attempt at bluster, but it was a feeble one, and suddenly sinking into a state of hesitancy which was not assumed, he went, with trembling steps and uncertain tread, towards the door.

The Earl was quietly staunching a few drops of blood which had appeared on his cheek where Smith's stick had broken the skin. He was still doing this, before a mirror in the room, when the footman came rather shyly in.

"I beg your pardon, my lord."

"Well !"

"My lady is outside on the terrace. She is talking with the person who just went out."

"D—!"

The Earl hesitated a moment, then, saying hastily, "Thanks!" he ran quickly out of the room and upstairs.

What was to be done? He had an intuition that Persis had been waiting for some such opportunity as this, and that some traitor among the servants had telegraphed to her concerning Nellie's arrival. Most heartily he wished

269

now that Lady Alicia had not brought the girl to Heynes Hall, for he perceived that a scandal was almost inevitable.

And a scandal, with poor Nellie's name bandied about, was just what he most wished to avoid. He debated with himself what bribe he should offer his wife to induce her to take the just, the humane view, and he decided that there was only one: part of the jewellery which poor Nellie had restored to him must be offered up at the shrine of the Furies.

In the mean time he was bathing his face, and doing his best to hide the mark of Alaric Smith's blow.

A minute later the announcement was made to him that Lady Alford had arrived, and that she was waiting for him in the Rose Room. Ten minutes afterwards he hurried down to appease her. It was with gloomy forebodings at his heart that he opened the door; and these grew deeper when he saw that Persis was raging up and down the room, and that she was not alone.

Gustavus Moon, standing in an attitude of profound respect and sympathy, was talking to her rapidly, earnestly; and he ceased speaking when Lord Alford entered.

Little as he knew about Moon, easy-going and goodnatured as he habitually was, the Earl mistrusted this man, and believed with Nellie that he was an adventurer.

His uneasiness was justified. For Gustavus Moon, who saw in a definite rupture between Nellie and Lord Alford his only hope of getting the diamond, which the girl would certainly restore to its legitimate owner if she got the chance, had been actively engaged in poisoning Lady Alford's mind against both her husband and Nellie.

He had not only succeeded in this, but he had made such headway with the Countess on his own account as to have suggested to her the possibility that he might himself discover the interest of the great diamond, and lay it at her feet.

The eyes of Persis glowed at this suggestion.

"Have you any idea where it is, then?" she had asked eagerly, when Moon carefully approached the subject.

"I shouldn't like to say that I could lay hands upon it at this moment," was his cautious reply. "But it appears to

be thought that the jewel is hidden—"

"Yes, yes, somewhere at The Firs. I've heard that said," she assented quickly.

"And if I were to be so happy as to find it, Lady Alford, my instinct would be to bring it to you. For since it is called the Countess's diamond, I imagine it must have been intended always to be the property of the Countess of Alford,

whoever she might be."

"Why, yes," said Persis, eagerly. "Of course, that is And do you really think you have a chance?"

"I would dare a good deal for the opportunity of serving you, Lady Alford," replied Moon, with a bold look which she did not resent.

On the contrary, she laughed indulgently.

"Oh, I'm afraid I'm not worth serving," she answered lightly. "I'm only a sort of waif, neglected by my husband—"

"Infamous!" said Moon between his clenched teeth.

"Deserted for other women."

"Though it's scarcely conceivable, when one compares them with you."

"Insulted when I protest."

"Shocking!"

"Even now I know that I shall be driven away, humiliated in every way when I object to his having this girl in the house, this thief's daughter!"

"You will order her out, I suppose?"

"Certainly I shall. I don't think I want stronger proof of what is going on than the fact that her own father assaulted Lord Alford on account of his conduct."

"True. And the girl's no fool. I shouldn't like to say that she and her father are in collusion—"

271

Persis started.

"I never thought of that. But it's very likely. She's artful, very artful. She deceived me, I confess, by an appearance of straightforwardness. Then what is her game, do you think?"

"By hook or by crook to take your place, Lady Alford."

Persis clenched her teeth.

"She shan't—she shan't. He wants me to take proceedings, of course. I shall do nothing of the kind. I'm not going to let the little minx finish her father's work. The one robbed Lord Alford of his jewels, the other wants to rob him of his wife."

"By far the greater theft of the two," replied Moon, getting bolder and looking into her ladyship's black eyes with a fervour which she was not in the humour to rebuke.

"No. I'll take a better revenge than that."

And she swept up and down the room, her long train of shimmering dark-green silk rustling as she went, and the big plume of her enormous black hat nodding with her restless movements.

"I confess I think you are justified," said Moon, with an appearance of passionate sympathy, as he leant over a chair, and followed her every movement eagerly with his eyes, as if rapt in admiration. "I hope you will forgive me for saying that the wrongs of a beautiful woman stir a man to the very depths."

They stirred him so much, indeed, that he unconsciously raised his voice, and Lord Alford, who entered the room at that moment, caught his last words.

Moon was silent at once. The Earl threw one glance at him, and then turned to Persis.

"Will you come into my study?"

And as he spoke he opened the door for her, without another look at her companion. Persis swept out, but turned, the moment he had closed the door, to say abruptly—



"I'm not going to the study. I have nothing to say to you."

"But I have something for you to hear."

She looked at his face.

"Who did that? Why is your face swollen?" she asked sharply.

"Surely you know."

"I dare say I can guess," she said curtly. "Was it done by Mr. Smith because you had run away with his daughter?"

"I have not run away with his daughter. I've not run away with anybody," cried he, impatiently.

She laughed in a high, irritating key.

"Haven't you? Then you've been very much maligned. I'm quite glad to hear it's not true, and that I shall not find Miss Smith installed among the odd creatures whom you choose to take under your protection."

As she spoke, she swept away from him towards the door of the Blue Saloon.

He hurried after her, and spoke at first imperiously, then imploringly, in her ear.

"Persis, stop. What do you mean? What are you doing?"

She had her fingers on the handle.

"I mean," she said recklessly, "that this girl shall not become Lady Alford. And I am doing—what will, if she has a rag of self-respect, prevent it."

And with these words she dashed open the door, her husband drawing back only just in time to save himself from being shot in head foremost as he struggled with her.

As she swept into the room, her face flushed, her eyes ablaze, all conversation was stopped. There was a hush of dismay, for everybody knew that there was to be an unpleasant scene.

Poor Nellie, who had been suffering from an uneasy feeling that something dreadful, something in which she was



273

concerned, was going on in the house, started up from a chair where she had been half hidden by a curtain.

Persis stormed across the room straight towards her.

"Your father has been here, Miss Smith, inquiring for you," she said, in a tone of the utmost insolence, raising her head in order to look at the girl through her eyelashes. "Perhaps you are not aware that he was refused permission to see you, and that he struck Lord Alford in consequence?"

And she turned to flash at her husband a look of cutting

disdain.

"Oh!" wailed Nellie, clasping her hands and turning

very white.

"I advise you not to waste your time in exclamations, but to leave the house as quickly as you can. And if your father's wish is not enough inducement, perhaps my command will be." She raised her hand, pointed to the door, and said in a hard voice, "Go?"



" PERSIS!"

Lord Alford uttered his wife's name with so much unexpected severity, in the mean time seizing her upraised hand and forcing it down, that she, taken by surprise, suffered him to hold her fast, and did not utter more than a faint exclamation of astonishment as he turned quickly and made a sign to Nellie to stay.

For the girl, in a dazed manner, and without a word, had instinctively obeyed Lady Alford's imperious command, and was on her way to the door.

"Miss Smith, stay one moment, please."

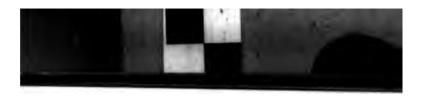
It was the Earl who spoke, and his altered tone, the grave imperiousness of his manner, had as much effect upon her as it had upon his wife.

Nellie stopped, and remained standing near the door, looking at husband and wife with eyes full of a sort of subdued terror of what was to happen next.

Instinctively the other guests, Mrs. Long, Ned Ferrers, and the rest, had withdrawn into the background, and gathered together, perhaps with a fear that it would be their turn to be attacked next by the angry Countess, perhaps only with the wish to be as much out of sight as possible during this unpleasant domestic episode.

There was a moment's dead silence, during which Lord Alford looked steadily at his wife.

"Persis," he said at last, almost under his breath, but



275

with so much decision that he left no room for escape from submission or flat rebellion, "you must apologize to this lady. At once, please."

But Nellie, surprised and shocked, tried to escape. Lord

Alford raised his voice.

"One moment, Miss Smith, please. Only one moment." Again he turned to his wife, lowering his voice to speak to her. "At once, Persis."

She moved restlessly.

"I have nothing to apologize for. It's true that her father struck you. Why should he, if all was right?"

"Apologize."

His voice sank lower still, and he insisted upon her meeting his eyes.

"What if I won't?"

"In that case, I'm sorry to say, I must refuse you admittance into my house for the future."

"Refuse me, your wife?"

"Yes. As long as you don't choose to live here, you are admitted only on sufferance, and you have no right whatever to insult my guests."

She made one more effort to face it out, raised her head, looked him straight in the eyes, and laughed. But it was only for a moment. She had never before seen such decision, such passion, as she now saw in his face; and she gave way.

Rapidly making up her mind that there was nothing for it but to submit, Persis had sense enough to do what she had

to do with a fair grace.

"All right," she said, in a tone as low as her husband's. And, as he let her go, she at once came up to Nellie, and said, hurrying out her words indeed, but saying them with some sort of unwilling graciousness, "I'm sorry I said what I did. I was too hasty, no doubt. I—I apologize." And then she turned swiftly round to her husband, with her head thrown back, and an expression equivalent, though she

uttered no word, to saying, "There, I've done it, and done it well, haven't I?"

Nellie looked at her shyly, tried to stop her, and murmuring something quite unintelligible, fled from the room, and

up the stairs in search of her hat and gloves.

Just as she was hastening down again, having got what she wanted, a door opened, and little Lady Alicia, who was always careful to disappear when any disturbance was threatened, came out to meet her.

"Where are you going to, child, at this time of night?

And what's the matter?"

For Nellie was white and trembling.

"Oh," said the girl, "don't ask me. You'll hear all about it downstairs. Don't you know that my—my father has been here, and that Lady Alford is here? I'm going away. Don't try to stop me, please. I ought never to have come. Thank you for all you have done and tried to do for me. But don't try to stop me, please, please."

Lady Alicia was much distressed. She had, of course, heard all about Alaric Smith's visit and attack upon the Earl, but she was most anxious not to appear to know more than was necessary. It was better, in order to make life possible at Heynes Hall, to gather information and then to affect ignorance. She must not, however, lose sight of Nellie with the big diamond still unfound.

"You'll be sure to let me know where you are, my dear, if you must go, won't you?"

"Yes. Good-bye."

She ran downstairs, in a fever lest she should meet again either the Earl or the Countess. But the only person who came in her way was Gustavus Moon, who was waiting about in the hall, in a state of great anxiety on more than one point. To run with the hare and hunt with the hounds is a business requiring the utmost delicacy of treatment, and he felt it to be most unfortunate that the Earl should have bounced in as he did when he, Moon, was making



277

himself agreeable to the Countess in a perfectly inoffensive way.

On seeing Nellie hurry out of the house, Moon instantly resolved to follow her and to find out what had happened, though he could make a shrewd guess, having himself been the means of stirring up the Countess against her.

He felt that this flight was a good thing for him, since he could not hope to make the impression he desired upon the girl as long as she remained at Heynes Hall.

She had scarcely got to the foot of the terrace steps when she found him beside her.

"Miss Nellie," cried he. "One word."

But she went on without heeding him, and he had to pour out his words as he kept pace with her, for she would not stop.

"Miss Nellie, listen to me. You can see now how right I was in telling you it was wrong to come here. Now you've been insulted, and you can't remain."

"It's no business of yours, Mr. Moon."

"Pardon me, I think it is. I'm your father's best, if not his only friend, and that alone would give me the right to do what I can for his daughter. As a matter of fact, I've been working for you against your will." This last speech was suggested by the sight of the cab which had brought Lady Alford from the station. She had left it at the lodgegates. "Knowing that you would never be able to stay here, exposed to insult and annoyance as you would be, I brought a fly to help you away."

Nellie stopped short in amazement.

"Did you?" she said incredulously.

"Here it is," cried Moon, triumphantly, as he ran out and threw open the door of the vehicle. "Jump in, and I'll get on the box and drive you to the station. You want to go to Bath, I suppose?"

Nellie hesitated. She was again in the same predicament as she had been once before that day. Moon was bound to

know where she was going, bound to follow her, bound to let her father know where she went to. There seemed to be only one thing to do: she must ask shelter at the Bridgers' house for the night, and risk their questions.

"Yes," she said in a spiritless fashion.

Indeed, she was worn out with the excitement of the day, and when she got into the fly, and sat back in a corner, she was glad to close her eyes and try to rest, though her head was aching and her very eyelids seemed heavy with pain.

Gustavus Moon got upon the box, and the fly drove away at a smart pace. The girl was too much occupied with reviewing the various scenes of the day to take much note of the way they went. It was quite dark, too, and these roads were not yet familiar to her. It was therefore with a cry of surprise and horror that she found, after what seemed a very long drive, that the fly was driving up between the yew hedges of The Firs.

But it was too late to protest. And when the vehicle turned round in front of the house, and Moon jumped down, rang the bell, and opened the door for her, she had neither strength nor spirit left to do more than say—

"You've deceived me!"

The young man's grandiloquent reply silenced her in spite of herself.

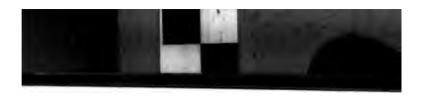
"Was ever deceit more justified, Miss Nellie? I've brought you to the only place on earth where you are safe; I've brought you home."

In spite of her mistrust of him, the words struck the right chord in the poor girl's heart, and she burst into tears.

"There, there," said Moon, kindly, "don't fret. It will be all right, all right."

She shook her head, but he was already leading her up the one step into the house, the door of which was being held open by a frightened maid.

In answer to a whispered question the girl said, in a breathless voice—



279

"Oh, he's very bad, sir. We've had to send for the doctor, and he says too that he's bad."

The words roused Nellie, and she and Moon exchanged

glances.

"There," said he, triumphantly, in a low voice, "now don't you see I was right? What would you have said if

anything had happened to him, and you away?"

The young man was anxious and restless, for, indeed, the fear that Alaric Smith might die with his precious secret unrevealed was a serious one. Nothing could exceed the tenderness with which Moon led the ex-convict's daughter upstairs, and waited outside her father's door for news of his condition.

Nellie did not knock. She went in softly, and advanced with hesitating footsteps towards the bed. Mrs. Barr, who was sitting beside the invalid, uttered an exclamation of relief when she saw her.

"Who's that?" cried a weak voice from the bed.

Nellie came a step nearer.

"It's I, Nellie."

"Nellie!"

He sprang up in bed with unexpected energy, and she, having more to fear than to hope from him, shrank back. But to her relief and delight, she saw on his face, for the very first time since his release from prison, a look of unmixed joy and kindness. Torn as she was between her natural affection for him and her anxiety to restore what he had stolen to its owner, she could not but be melted by the real need of her that she now saw in his eyes, by the tone of his voice, as he cried again—

"Nellie! Thank God you've come back!"

She was almost fainting, and as she stumbled into the chair beside him, her hands dropped to her side.

After only a moment's pause, however, during which her father burst again into abuse of Lord Alford, she raised her head, and said doggedly—

"Father, you're wrong about him-quite wrong. He is as generous and chivalrous a man as ever lived. He could not have behaved better, more nobly, more honourably to me, if I had been a princess."

Mrs. Barr had disappeared, leaving father and daughter together. But Alaric Smith was obstinate, and would not be silenced until his daughter told him frankly that, rather than hear the Earl abused, she would leave the house. She was alarmed at her own independence when she said this, but it had the desired effect; and her father, recognizing with some surprise a touch of his own obstinacy in his usually submissive daughter, sank into welcome silence.

Nellie watched by his side for some hours, and then very gratefully gave up her place to Mrs. Barr, and went to her

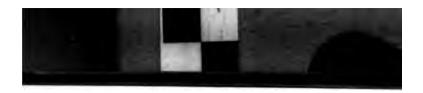
own room for the rest she so much needed.

On the following day she was faced by a fresh difficulty. Mrs. Bridger came to The Firs at an early hour, and after inquiring about the invalid, proceeded to catechise Nellie with a minuteness which showed that versions of the unpleasant affair at Heynes Hall on the previous night were already about.

Like most girls who are brought early face to face with the rough facts of life, Nellie was frankly contemptuous concerning the conventions which order the lives of most girls of her station. Still, Mrs. Bridger's questions and observations could not but fill her with some uneasiness as to the gossip and scandal to which Lady Alford's and her own father's acts had given rise.

When Mrs. Bridger had satisfied her curiosity and made the girl thoroughly miserable, she went away, and Nellic was in a state of the utmost depression when Gustavus Moon, who had passed the solicitor's wife in the drive, came in.

"What has that old griffin been saying to you, Miss Nellie?" he asked, when the girl had answered his inquiries about her father.



28 I

The young man was very gentle, considerate, kind; and Nellie, full of resentment against the woman, was disposed to be grateful to the man.

"Oh, she only says that I'm a sort of lost soul, and that no lady will ever visit me, and no man ever marry me, and all because of other people's acts and not my own," replied the girl, bitterly.

Gustavus Moon's eyes glistened. Here was his opportunity. Here was Alaric Smith dying, and his daughter about to be left alone in the world. Coming to her side, with a face which really glowed with feeling, though the

origin of it might be doubtful, he said-

"One part of her kind remarks was obviously wrong, Miss Nellie. It gives me courage to say once more what I've long had in my heart. Let ugly old women say what they will, I'll never doubt you. Miss Nellie, I've said it before, I say it again: I want to marry you. Won't you -won't you let me?"

Taken at a disadvantage, Nellie hesitated. She was grateful to him for his tact in bringing her back to her father's roof; grateful for his soothing offer after Mrs. Bridger's wounding suspicions. Above all, she was very, very lonely and miserable.

And she gave way. In spite of her suspicions, of her doubts, remembering only that here was at least one friendly face, one kind voice, she looked up with a flush in her face, in a desperate kind of way.

"Nobody else wants me!" she panted out recklessly. "If you do, well, I ought to be grateful, and perhaps—I hope—I am."

But as he kissed her cheek, sealing this wild promise, she shivered.

What was this she was doing? She hardly knew.

CHAPTER XXXI

A sound in the hall outside gave her the excuse she wanted for springing to her feet and getting free from Gustavus Moon, who had seized her hand, and was kissing it passionately, when she coyly drew back from the second kiss he would have given her on the cheek.

"It's my father!" cried she, in astonishment,

"Ah! so much the better. We can tell him, and get the paternal blessing," said Moon, lightly, as the door opened, and Alaric Smith, looking very white, very feeble, came slowly into the room.

It occurred to Moon that he had only been just in time with his wooing, for there was a look on the face of the ex-convict, a grey bloodlessness of complexion, which betrayed that he was not long for this world.

Both he and Nellie hastened to make him as comfortable as they could in his favourite wicker-chair by the window which looked upon the lawn.

The invalid, with his shrewd eyes, saw that something of interest was going forward, and he scanned first the one face and then the other expectantly. He was in a sullen mood, however, his temporary relief and joy at the return of his daughter having given place to his usual selfish captiousness and reserve.

"What is it?" he said at last, irritably. Gustavus Moon affected to laugh heartily.

"Ah, you're too clever for us. But I think we've got

a surprise for you this time, Smith, and I hope it will be a pleasant one."

"Surprises seldom are pleasant," remarked the older man, dryly. And he looked again at his daughter. But perhaps he guessed what was coming, for he said to her, "Do you think it will be a pleasant one, eh, Nellie?"

The girl shook her head with a sort of weary impatience.

She was repenting already what she had done.

Moon hastened to speak for her.

"I've asked Nellie to be my wife, Smith, and I think you ought to know that there's nobody on earth who, for your sake as well as her own, will take more care of her."

But Alaric Smith was by no means enthusiastic.

"Are you going to marry him, Nellie?" he asked shortly.

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps. I suppose so," said she,

indifferently.

An angry light glowed in Moon's eyes as Smith greeted these words with a sardonic laugh.

"She's not enthusiastic, Moon," said he, dryly.

"She's gone through too much lately to be much excited about anything," retorted the younger man. "But I think you must own that, after last night, she's done the best thing she could do."

Alaric Smith's face flushed at this taunt.

"Run upstairs, child, and fetch my pocket-book. It's either under my pillow or in the right-hand drawer of the dressing-table," said he.

Perhaps Nellie guessed that the errand was an excuse for getting rid of her, for she was gone a long time. As soon as she was out of hearing her father addressed Gustavus Moon abruptly.

"Are you in love with her, honestly in love with her, or are you only anxious to get what I've got, Moon?"

"You, as Nellie's father, ought to be able to answer that question," said Moon, grandiloquently. "I fell in love

with her the first time I saw her. And if I didn't care for her, should I ask her to marry me, after the scandal you caused last night?"

"You might," retorted Smith, as dryly as ever.
"You might be thinking more of something else than of the girl."

"Don't you know me better?"

" No."

The answer was so frank, so simple, that Moon found nothing to say. There was a pause, and then Alaric Smith said—

"However, I have means of finding out which it is you're after. If it's the girl, well and good; if it's not, why, then, it's not well and good—for you. And so I give you fair warning, Moon."

"You do me injustice. Didn't I bring your daughter back to you last night? Could I have done better for her

and for you?"

"Or for yourself? Perhaps not," replied Smith, with disconcerting rudeness. "However, we'll take it that pure affection, and nothing else, prompted you. In that case, Moon, you're perfectly safe. You will find her a treasure, and I hope you'll prove worthy of her. But don't expect anything more than just the girl; if you do, mark my words, you'll be disappointed. I've had a hard life; now I'm making up for it. But I mean to leave nothing behind—nothing."

And with this emphatic speech, Alaric Smith turned his chair round to face the window, and declined further conversation.

Perhaps the poor lover's ardour was a little damped by these unpromising words; certain it is that he was shy and retiring during the evening, and that Nellie, who was by no means anxious for him to press his attentions upon her, was left in peace. He left early, and did not put in an appearance on the following morning, as his custom had been.

285

For he had taken lodgings in the village in his assiduous devotion to his friends.

Between Smith and his daughter meanwhile there was even more than the old reserve. In the course of the morning he asked again for the jewels he had left in her care, and she confessed frankly that she had shown one of them to Lord Alford, that he had recognized it, and that she had then, without further explanation, placed all the jewels in his desk.

The girl said all this without flinching, for indeed she had now gone through so much that she was ready to face any fresh outburst of her father's anger. All he did was to shrug his shoulders, and to mutter-

"Five thousand pounds' worth! The girl's a fool—a born fool!"

And she was thankful to get off so lightly.

They had had luncheon, and Alaric Smith was strolling in the garden, leaning on two sticks, to see the progress the men were making with their work, when a motor-car drove up to the door, and Lady Alford stepped out.

Catching sight of Alaric Smith in the garden, she went

towards him, all smiles and amiable greetings, with her feathers nodding, and her long train sweeping behind her, a feather boa falling off one shoulder, and the front of her dress an inextricable tangle of charms and chains, torn feathers, and twisted muslin flounces. "A regular ragbag," as Alaric Smith afterwards described her to his daughter.

"Oh, my dear Mr. Smith, and how are you, after that dreadful tussle with my naughty, naughty husband?" she cried, as she almost ran to him, with one arm in its long, wrinkled glove held high in the air, and with odds and ends of feather and flounce streaming on the wind behind her.

"Oh, I'm very well, thank you, Lady Alford, and I hope your husband is also," said Alaric Smith, dryly.

"Well, his face isn't all right yet. But really I can't

feel sorry for him, for I think he well deserved what you gave him. He is a shocking fellow, and I had to tell him so myself. I quite took your part, I did indeed."

"Very good of you, I'm sure."

"And more than that—I intend to guard against such naughty ways for the future. I've taken up my abode at Heynes Hall, and you need have no fear for your daughter if she cares to pay the house another visit. I shall be there. And if you would like to entrust the girl to my guardianship, I should undertake the office very willingly, and do my best to make up for any little feeling of irritation she may still feel against me."

Alaric Smith looked steadily at the lady. She had met him on the terrace outside the Hall on the previous evening, and had expressed her sympathy with him, and her anger against her husband, on his telling her of his attack on Lord

Alford, and its cause.

"You don't feel jealous any longer, then, Lady Alford?"

"Oh no. I'm sure it was all a mistake. You were too hasty, I think, and I know I was."

"Why, what did you do?"

She hesitated.

"Didn't your daughter tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

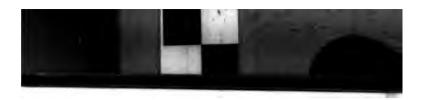
The Countess tried to laugh it off, but he persisted.

"Well, acting on your own words, I—I requested her to leave the Hall. I assure you I'm very, very sorry. Do let me become your daughter's guardian, dear Mr. Smith, and the Earl and I will do our best for her, introduce her into society, and all that."

The wily invalid looked at her with a gleam of amuse-

ment in his dull eyes.

"She doesn't seem to have much liking for society, Lady Alford, in the first place," he said dryly. "And in the second, she's going to be married, so that when I am gone she will have another guardian to hand."



287

The Countess looked surprised.

"Going to be married!" echoed she, almost incredulously.

"Yes. I think you know the young man; his name

is Moon."

Lady Alford's face betrayed not merely amazement, but even something like indignation. She suppressed what she felt as well as she could, and uttered effusive congratulations, which were perhaps not quite unspiced with venom. She had, indeed, prided herself upon this remarkable stroke in coming to offer her services as guardian to Alaric Smith's daughter. On the previous evening she had been struck with the fact that the ex-convict must be near his end, and the impression was deepened when she now saw him by daylight. If only Nellie could be entrusted to her own care, Lady Alford thought she could find means to benefit considerably by what the ex-convict must leave to his daughter.

"This engagement is rather sudden, isn't it?" she asked, when she had grown subdued under Alaric Smith's

dry reception of her congratulations.

"Well, it is rather, perhaps. It's a very singular thing, Lady Alford, how many sudden offers of one sort or another we've had made to us lately."

She laughed in a half-hearted sort of way, with a distinct consciousness that this wicked old man was even more wicked than anybody had supposed. And then rather abruptly, and without asking to see Nellie, she took her leave, and drove away.

Before her car had reached the bottom of the drive, however, she met Gustavus Moon, who was coming to pay his duty-visit at The Firs. The young man looked guilty, and would have passed on with a formal salutation, but Lady Alford was far too angry with him to permit this. She got out of the car, which she sent on towards the lodge, and speaking very coldly and haughtily, said—

"And so, Mr. Moon, I find you are very much cleverer

than you pretended."

"Indeed, Lady Alford, I wish I were clever," said he, recovering himself, and deciding at once upon his plan of action. "For, if I were, I should be able to guess how I've offended you."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I like people to be honest and straightforward. I like them to say what they mean. You said the night before last that Miss Smith was acting in collusion with her father to get hold of the Earl. To-day I find that you are actually engaged to be married to her."

At once he assumed an air of mystery.

"I'm going to trust you with a secret," he replied in a low voice. "I have engaged myself to Miss Smith on purpose to obtain the diamond—the great diamond—from her—for you, Lady Alford." Persis looked incredulous, but he went on, "It's a hateful expedient—a mean one; but it was the only way. And, after all, in dealing with fraudulent people, may not a little fraud on one's own side be forgiven?"

"Is this the truth?" asked Persis, with a piercing

look.

"Look straight into my eyes, Lady Alford, and judge whether I would deceive you—you!"

And Gustavus Moon threw into his blue eyes all the passion, all the admiration, which he was capable of

expressing.

Lady Alford was emotional, impressionable, used to flattery, and easily deceived by it. A few more rather adroit compliments, a few more earnest assurances of her power over him, sufficed to persuade, or to half persuade her that this engagement was really no more than a ruse to get possession of the big diamond.

And if once he should succeed in this, she flattered herself that she could bring more arguments than one to bear



289

upon the socially ambitious young man to induce him to give it up to her.

Persis got into her motor-car again, assisted with tender gallantry by the artful Moon, and drove back to Heynes Hall in a fever to impart to her husband news which could not fail to annoy or distress him.

Lady Alford was one of those not uncommon wives who, not caring two pins for their husbands, are yet extremely jealous of any woman who attracts the admiration they will not themselves take the trouble to retain.

She burst in upon him with a smile of unusual radiance upon her face. He looked surprised, for, on insisting, two evenings before, upon taking up her quarters at the Hall, she had expressed the intention of keeping to her own wing of the mansion, and of leaving her husband and his "crew" to have the remainder of the building to themselves.

"You, Persis, what do you want?" said he, coldly, as

he looked up from the desk where he was writing.

"Oh, I've come with some news—interesting news. Don't look so cross, Jack; I tell you it's very interesting indeed."

"Well," said he, scenting danger in her gleaming eyes and over-excited manner.

"I've just been to The Firs-"

He started up, angry and distressed.

"What! After that night? Didn't I tell you I would not have Miss Smith insulted? That she is absolutely irreproachable, and worthy of every respect, and that every respect is to be shown to her?"

Lady Alford threw herself into a chair, laughing

mockingly.

"Oh, don't waste all that beautiful energy and indignation, Jack. Nobody has shown Miss Smith any disrespect. How could they, indeed, when she'll soon have a husband to protect her?"

"A husband? Who?"

"Mr. Moon. He's going to marry her. He and Mr. Smith both told me so."

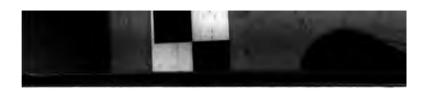
"It's a lie!" said he, curtly.

"Is it?" cooed she, softly. "Calm yourself, Jack, or people will think the lady is not quite so irreproachable as you say."

Lord Alford sat down, pointing to the door, and unable

to speak.

He felt, under that cold, mocking glance, that he had betrayed more than he wished—more than he himself was aware that there was to hide.



CHAPTER_XXXII

WHEN Gustavus Moon reached the house, he was told that Mr. Smith was in the drawing-room, but that he was so ill and weak that it was doubtful whether he could see anybody but his daughter, who was with him.

"Oh, he'll see me," said Moon, confidently, as he pushed his way in.

By hook or by crook he must have an interview with both father and daughter at once, and see that no harm had been done to his own cause by the possible indiscretions of Lady Alford.

So he entered the drawing-room with soft footsteps, and an appropriate look of deep concern on his face.

Nellie was kneeling beside her father's chair, and in the few moments during which Moon remained undiscovered, he perceived an expression upon her face which seemed, to his shrewd eyes, to intimate that she had been giving her father more of her confidence than hitherto.

This indeed was the case. Alaric Smith, entering the house, after his talk with the Countess, in an exhausted as well as irritable condition, had heard from his daughter's lips, for the first time, an account of the manner in which Lady Alford had ordered her out of the house and had then apologized at her husband's bidding.

The invalid listened in stony silence, but he made no hard or stony comments, uttered no reproaches, and Nellie had been suffered to drop into a silence in which, somehow, she felt that she had some share of her father's sympathy.

When she caught sight of Gustavus Moon her whole attitude and manner changed at once. She had begun to repent bitterly of her rash engagement or half-engagement, and her greatest anxiety was now to break it off in the least ostentatious and quietest manner.

Not that her father had made any comments unfavourable to Moon or to his suit. On the contrary, he studiously avoided any reference to that young man, and Nellie preferred to follow the same course.

Now his presence seemed an intrusion.

She rose quickly from her knees, greeted him so coolly that it was impossible for him to be effusive, and stepped back so that he might approach her father.

Moon was shocked at the rapid steps which death seemed to be making towards the ex-convict. A sort of frenzy possessed the young man when he told himself that, having no further need of the good things of this world, and having by marriage in a way provided for his daughter, Alaric Smith was only too likely to indulge his spiteful whim to the end, and, after living in comfort and luxury on the reputation of the diamond, to leave it hidden where no mortal hand would ever recover it.

What was to be done?

Moon held him tenderly by the hand, and said, with great concern—

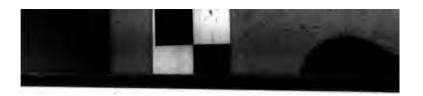
"What have you been doing with yourself? It seems to me you don't look half so well as you did yesterday. Nellie, have you been taking good care of him?"

"I think so," she said from the other end of the room.

Alaric Smith looked shrewdly into the young man's face—

"You, too, look less well than you did yesterday. Haven't you been taking care of yourself?"

Moon flushed. Indeed he had gone through a good deal of anxiety, but it was not of a kind that he could confide to the reputed possessor of the big diamond.



293

"I should feel better," he replied, after a moment's hesitation, "if I could get from Nellie a definite promise to give me the right to take care of her—and you, too—at as early a date as possible."

Nellie began to utter protests, in a faint voice, from the background. But Alaric Smith said—

"And what are you going to do for a living, when you've married her?"

The young man hesitated.

"That's just what I want to consult you both about," said he. "I can turn my hand to anything."

"Oh, I know that," said Smith, with an unmistakable sneer.

Nellie stood aloof, with a feeling that there was some secret tension between the two men, something held in reserve on both sides.

- "At present, as you know, I'm holding myself at your disposal altogether," went on Moon, swallowing his mortification as well as he could. "I've done nothing during the last week or two but look after your gardeners and run your errands."
 - "A bad preparation for settling down, isn't it?"
- "Well," said Moon, nervously, glancing at Nellie, who looked pale and alarmed, "so it is. But the temptation was too strong for me!"
- "And you took it for granted, I suppose, that she wouldn't be quite portionless, eh?"
- "Certainly I hope she won't. For though I can keep her in comfort by my own work, I can't in luxury. And I shouldn't like her to be less comfortable married than she is single."
- "A very good principle. Well, now, it's time that we should come to an understanding, isn't it?"
- "Father!" broke in Nellie, in a hoarse whisper, stealing to the back of his chair.

But he silenced her with an imperious wave of the hand.

"You and I, Moon, will talk this out together—say, tomorrow night. It is fair that you should know just what I propose to do. And I think I may say that you won't be disappointed."

As he spoke his voice swelled a little, and a flush of expectant greed brightened Moon's eyes. Of Nellie, on the other hand, he would take no notice; not even the pleading touch of her hand on his shoulder would induce him to do more than shake his head impatiently. And both she and Moon understood that this attitude implied a fixed resolve to look upon his stolen possessions as his own, and to make use of them according to that view.

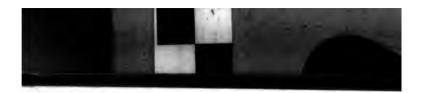
"You had better not stay now," he said to the young man. "It's true that I'm not very fit to-day. I'm not in the habit of receiving lady visitors, and the Countess of Alford kept me talking longer than I could very well bear."

Moon took his leave, without succeeding in obtaining a few words alone with Nellie.

She, on the other hand, failed in extracting from her father the promise she wanted, that he would obtain her release from her engagement by refusing to leave her anything.

Since the mad moment when, in weariness and desperation, she had half-accepted Gustavus Moon, she had realized that marriage with him would in all probability make her proposed restitution of any of Lord Alford's property impossible. She was resolved, therefore, in one way or another to escape from this bond, and the cold reserve with which her father listened to her expostulations and entreaties did not alter her determination.

He seemed to look upon her marriage as a settled thing, not one that he regarded with enthusiasm, but yet as a matter about which there was no further question. She had agreed to marry Moon; she had therefore nothing further to do but to stand back and leave her father and future husband to settle the business part of the matter between themselves.



295

As for Moon, he had gone away with the pleasant assurance that Alaric Smith had repented of his selfish words of the previous day, and that he meant to treat his daughter and her future husband in the handsome manner they had every right to expect. And he could scarcely control his impatience as he told himself that, on the following evening, he should in all probability get the clue to the precious secret of the hiding-place of the diamond. Smith was certainly too ill to look forward to much more of life and the power of enjoyment. There would be all the more to enjoy by those he was to leave behind.

Alaric Smith retired early to his room, and Nellie spent a long evening by herself. On the following morning, not much more than an hour after breakfast, the household was thrown into a sort of consternation by the appearance of Lord Alford's phaeton in the drive.

To the question whether Mr. Smith was at home the reply was that he was ill in bed and unable to see anybody.

The Earl persisted.

"Tell him I won't ask him to give me more than five minutes," said he. "But the matter is important, urgent."

To the surprise of the parlourmaid herself, when she went for the second time to the sick-room, the reply was that Mr. Smith would see Lord Alford if he would come upstairs.

Nellie, who had seen him coming and hidden herself promptly, was sick with suspense and with wonder as to what this strange meeting might mean.

The young Earl went with soft steps into the bedroom of the ex-convict, who signed to Mrs. Barr to leave the room.

He had shown a great partiality for the lodge-keeper as a nurse, preferring her ministrations to those of his daughter.

He was propped up with pillows, and his skin looked dry and yellow against the white linen.

"Well," was his grim greeting, "are you come to have

your revenge for the thrashing I gave you the other night, eh?"

"No," said Lord Alford, speaking without any resentment.

The invalid pointed to a chair, where the full light from the window fell.

"Sit there," he said. The Earl quietly obeyed. "Now," went on the man who had robbed him, peering into his face, and clutching the bedclothes with a skinny hand, "I'll tell you what you've come for. It's the same errand as that of the rest, the very same! You think I've got your diamond, your precious diamond, and like the fool you are, you think to worm the secret out of a dying man."

Lord Alford sat back in his chair, and stared at him with

a contemptuous look, half smile, half frown.

"Diamond be hanged!" said he, with a snap of the fingers. "Do you suppose I've come to squabble over the property you robbed me of, like a dog over a bone? No. Keep your stolen goods, and much good will they do you. What I've come about is something more important. It's —it's your daughter Nellie. Is it true, can it be true, that you are going to marry her to that cad, Moon?"

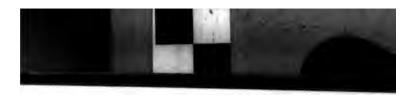
Alaric Smith was taken aback. Used to meet cunning by cunning deeper still, this bluff challenge threw him off

his balance.

"Wh—what business is that of yours? Wh—what if I do?" stammered he.

"What if you do? What if you do! Why just this: if you do, you will be guilty of a far greater crime than stealing my jewels, of a far greater folly than striking me and raising a scandal. For you will be giving—or selling—I don't know which—your young daughter to a man unworthy of her, one of the pleasant riff-raff who are good enough to play billiards with, but not to marry a nice girl to."

"Psha! You're jealous! You, a married man!"



297

"Oh, rot!" said Lord Alford, whose vocabulary often wanted editing. "Come, you're a man of the world, and you know very well that the fact that a man is married doesn't make him blind and deaf and dumb! If I had designs upon the girl, do you suppose I should be fool enough to come here and say all this to you? No. I should welcome a marriage which made her an absolutely certain prey, now shouldn't I?"

Alaric Smith stared with bright eyes at this man, in whose accents, in whose frank face, it was impossible not to

recognize sincerity.

"Yes," he muttered under his breath, "I—I suppose you would. I suppose," he went on, raising himself on his elbow, and speaking sneeringly, with a new suspicion in his mind, "you want to become her guardian, then, as your wife did yesterday?"

The Earl stared.

"My wife wanted to be Nellie's guardian!"

"Yes. Most disinterestedly, no doubt."

The Earl took no notice of his sneer.

"By Jove!" he said to himself softly.

"But I treated her as I treat you," went on the invalid, speaking in a voice hoarse with excitement, and glaring at the young man from his pillows; "with respectful thanks I decline the interference of you both. My daughter I marry to whom I please, without asking permission of anybody. Now you have had your five minutes, Lord Alford. I'm an invalid. As you ordered me out of your house, I now order you out of mine."

"All right," said the Earl, rising and speaking quite good humouredly. "I'll go as soon as you like. But I warn you that if you persist in an arrangement which I know to be iniquitous, I shall take upon myself to prevent it."

"You will! Ha, ha!"

The sound of the shrill, broken, mocking laugh of the invalid followed Lord Alford downstairs.

He tried in vain to see Nellie; she was out, the servants said. And though he guessed that this was not the truth, he did not know how to attain his object of seeing her.

So he drove away; and Nellie herself, with eyes dim and straining, watched him with a fast-beating heart, as he went down the drive and disappeared between the yew hedges.

Alaric Smith would not see Nellie for the remainder of the day, in spite of the frequent messages she sent him by Mrs. Barr.

"He had been upset," said that good woman, whose countenance was perturbed and pale.

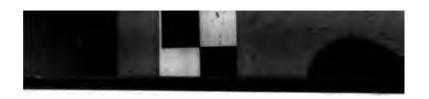
There was a weird silence over the whole house that day, and when Gustavus Moon, punctual to the appointment given him, called at six o'clock to have the momentous interview with Nellie's father, he was met at the door by Mrs. Barr, who stood before him, trembling from head to foot, and could not for a moment reply to his question.

When she did, however, gasping out the words under her breath, the effect upon the visitor was electrical.

"Oh, sir! oh, sir! haven't you heard? Mr. Smith is dead."

Gustavus Moon reeled back as if a blow had struck him full in the face.

Dead, and with the secret untold!



CHAPTER XXXIII

Moon recovered himself with an effort, and again approaching Mrs. Barr, and checking her as she would have shut the door, he asked—

"When did he die? Who was with him? Tell me

all about it."

He had forced his way into the hall, and was standing, with haggard eyes and convulsively twitching face, imperiously demanding full information.

But Mrs. Barr was nervous and unwilling to talk.

"Oh, sir, can't you come some other time?" she said in a low voice. "I've just told Miss Nellie, and she's that scared, and crying her eyes out besides, it breaks one's heart."

"Tell me what I want to know, and I'll go," persisted Moon. But even as he spoke he was gently edging his way towards the staircase.

Mrs. Barr ran after him.

"Where are you going, sir?"

"I'm going to see him. I---"

"No, sir, indeed you're not. Nobody's to see him yet. And you'll please to leave the house, sir, till we send for you," she said rather tartly.

Moon looked at her in surprise and uneasiness. Never before had she or any of the servants taken this tone with him. He began to feel seriously alarmed.

"Well," said he, "I'll go if I can see Miss Nellie

first."

Mrs. Barr hesitated.

"Not otherwise," said he, planting himself firmly on the bottom stair.

"Very well, sir. Come in here, and I'll tell her."

She showed him into the drawing-room, and a few moments later, Nellie, her eyes red with weeping, but calm and cool, came into the room. He advanced quickly towards her, but she stopped him, putting out her hand with a gesture which it was impossible to mistake.

"Nellie, forgive me for insisting upon seeing you at such a time. But I may be able to comfort you—"

"Thank you," said the girl, cutting him short. "I would rather have had to-day to myself; but since you have come, we'll say what has to be said, and get it over. Please understand, Mr. Moon, that I don't wish to see you again."

She was prepared for an outburst of pleading, or of indignation. But Moon, who was quiet and thoughtful,

took her decision very calmly.

"You won't marry me, then?" said he, in a matterof-fact tone. "Although your father looked upon it as settled?"

"No. I'm not so sure that he did think it settled; but certainly I didn't. I'm sorry if I seem to have been silly and weak-minded, and to have said one thing and meant another. But if you consider what a harassing time——"

"Don't mention it," said he, briskly. "I'm very sorry, but I should be the last person to add to your troubles by pressing an unwelcome suit upon you. At the same time, to show you how genuine my friendship for you is, I must beg you to use me in any way you please. Send me to the undertaker's——"

Nellie shivered.

"Thank you. Mrs. Barr tells me she'll see to everything," she said quickly. "My father thought so highly of



301

her that she knows more of his wishes than any one else. Nobody else was with him when he died."

"Have you seen him-since?" asked Moon, suddenly.

"Yes. Half an hour ago. He looked quite peaceful, as he used to do in his sleep."

"When did it happen?"

"This morning, an hour after Lord Alford had been with him."

Moon pricked up his ears.

"And have you no suspicion? Are you quite satisfied about his death? Don't you think there ought to be an inquest?"

Nellie looked at him in horror.

"An inquest! When he was known to be dying of consumption?"

"Well, I shouldn't feel satisfied, if I were you. I wish you'd let me go into his room, and——"

"It was his wish that nobody should go. We must respect his wishes."

"Of course. Well, Miss Nellie, I'm sorry it must be all over between us. But you must look upon me still as your friend. Indeed, I am sure you will. I will call round and see you again to-morrow, with Bridger. We shall have something to tell you."

He went away, and Nellie felt rather surprised that he should have said nothing about her father's property, which she knew to be more important in his eyes than anything else.

On the following morning, however, just before luncheon, a gig drove up, out of which Bridger and Moon stepped together. Nellie went to the drawing-room to see them, and found the solicitor in a great state of agitation and annoyance at the refusal of Mrs. Barr to let him see the remains of his old partner.

His last wishes, Mrs. Barr said, were that no one should see him after he was dead but Miss Nellie and the doctor.

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Nellie saw nothing strange in this wish, as she felt convinced that the sole object of both these importunate visitors was to hunt about the death-chamber, in the hope of finding something to repay them for their trouble.

Both were much agitated, and it soon became apparent that they had something on their minds. It was Mr.

Bridger who broached the subject first.

"Mr. Moon tells me, Nellie, that your father made a will a few days ago. Do you know anything about it?"

Nellie grew white.

"No," she said. "He never mentioned it to me."

"He made it on the day you ran away to Heynes Hall, Miss Nellie," said Moon. "And it was because of what he told me about the contents that I was so anxious to marry you."

Nellie looked doubtful.

"I know nothing about it," she said.

"Who witnessed it?" said Bridger, sharply.

"Two of the servants, I think he said."

There was a moment's silence.

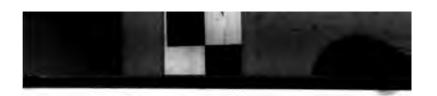
"You are the only person who seems to know anything about it. Do you know where he put it?"

"In his study, I should think. That was where he kept his papers, I know. Miss Nellie, may we go and see?"

"Oh yes, if you wish! But it seems to be rather soon to worry yourselves about these things."

Without heeding the remonstrances and excuses they both murmured, Nellie, who knew that she could only trust them both as far as she could see them, led the way to the study, and stood by while they rummaged among the contents of the room, uneasy under her eyes, but keen to peer into every corner.

It was Moon who, opening one of the drawers of a heavy roll-top writing-table, called out that he had found it. Nellie, who was watching both men carefully, with a



303

secret suspicion that one or other might have brought with him what he wished to find, was able to assure herself that the document which he drew out and proceeded to read, was really in the drawer at the time he opened it.

Bridger, who was watching too, was also satisfied on this point. He hastened to the side of the other man, took from him the document, examined it carefully, and then turned quickly to Nellie.

"Nellie," said he, "this will, if it is genuine, deprives you of every bit of property your father had in the world. And all in favour of this man, Moon."

The younger man tried to snatch the paper from him.

"Let me see it, let me see it!" he cried.

Nellie watched very calmly while a sort of tussle went on between the two men. Caring not two straws about the will, which disposed of property which she looked upon as ill-gotten, she was yet tamely interested to see which of the two men would get the better of the other, and to know what the document was, about which they made such a fuss. She would have had no doubts but for Mr. Bridger's evident suspicions; but these were so strong as to be infectious.

If it should prove to be a genuine will, then Gustavus Moon would enter into possession of The Firs, and of what chance there was of recovering the diamond.

If it were not genuine, and the property should descend to her, she would be in a fresh difficulty, for she knew Lord Alford better than to suppose he would suffer her to give it up to him. As for the diamond, it seemed to be lost for ever.

The wrangle ended by Bridger's reading the will aloud. It was short and clear, and stated that his daughter and only near relation having that day run away from him, he left all he possessed in the world to his trusted friend, Gustavus Moon, who had stood by him in his illness and in his

difficulties, and who had proved himself dearer as well as nearest han that one who was nearest in blood.

The will was written entirely in the hand of Alaric Smith himself, upon the blue foolscap paper of which there was a considerable quantity in his desk, and was dated the seventeeth of June, which was the day on which Nellie had run away.

Mr. Bridger, having read the signatures of the two witnesses, Margaret Brown and Emma Wellings, and having ascertained that they were respectively the parlour-maid and the kitchen-maid, at once sent for the two girls, who, though nervous and agitated at the interrogatory to which they were put, both said that they had signed their names to the will on the day in question, at the request of Mr. Smith.

Mr. Bridger did his best to conceal his mortification. He would have taken the will away with him; but to this Gustavus Moon demurred, saying that obviously it was he who ought to have possession of it.

The matter was settled by Nellie, who locked up the document in the escritoire in the drawing-room, and gave Moon the key.

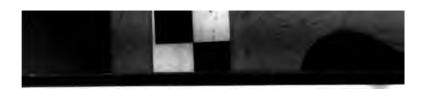
"I can't think," she said, "why my father didn't put it in here. This was where he usually kept things locked up."

Moon flushed a little at what looked like a fresh suspicion, and Joel Bridger looked askance at him.

They wasted very little time, after this discovery, in taking their departure, promising to return in the afternoon of the following day. No sooner had they left the house than Nellie seized a pen and paper, and wrote the following letter:—

"DEAR LORD ALFORD,

"I am very sorry to have to trouble you, though I know you are too good to refuse to do what I ask. Will you come here to-morrow at half-past three? My father is



305

dead, as I dare say you have heard, and he has left a will, by which everything he left goes to Gustavus Moon. We cannot—Mr. Bridger and I—find that anything is wrong with the will; but I see that Mr. Bridger thinks there may be something. I don't know whether you can help me in this, but I feel rather like a prisoner surrounded by enemies, and I have no one in the world that I can ask to help me but you.

"Yours very gratefully,
"Nellie Smith."

She posted this letter herself, knowing that it would reach Heynes Hall in the morning. Before luncheon on the following day, a mounted groom came to the door, bearing this note:—

"Right you are! We'll have the rogues on toast yet! "A."

And at half-past three, exactly five minutes after the arrival of Mr. Bridger and Gustavus Moon, Lord Alford came dashing up the drive in his phaeton, and in another minute was in the drawing-room, shaking hands with Nellie.

Mr. Bridger looked agitated. He had the country attorney's natural nervousness about offending the great man of the neighbourhood, and wished he hadn't come. He felt doubtful, moreover, as to the meaning of the Earl's presence.

Moon, more assured in his position, was more daring. He boldly asked Lord Alford why he had come.

"Well," said the Earl, genially, "I feel that I am in some sort in the position of guardian to this little girl, having saved her life and being perforce in some of her secrets. And having heard a rumour that her father had made an extraordinary, a most extraordinary will, leaving

her nothing, I thought I could do no less than come over to see it she would need any legal assistance in the matter."

"Legal assistance!" laughed Moon, nervously, playing with his moustache and shifting his eyes from one face to another. "There's no need of that, Lord Alford. I hope you don't think I should take any mean advantage of a moment of pique on my late friend's part."

"May I see the will?" asked the Earl.

Both Bridger and Moon looked surprised; the latter also alarmed.

"Oh! Oh, certainly! Miss Nellie, I suppose you have no objection to Lord Alford's interfering in this matter?"

"Oh no! I asked him to come," said she, simply.

A sort of calm had taken the place of her feverish agitation, for she felt that her cause was in good hands. After a little demur, the will was taken out of the escritoire, and handed to Lord Alford.

He read it through carefully, and then turned to the solicitor.

"Have you any doubts as to the genuineness of this will?" he asked bluntly.

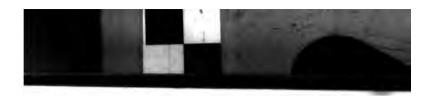
Bridger stammered, said that he didn't see—he didn't know—

"Have you, my lord?" asked Moon, who was white to the lips.

"Well, frankly, I must tell you that I have. Have you, Mr. Moon, ever heard the name of Algernon Barker?"

Nellie, who was sitting opposite to the door, saw it move a little, as if the handle had been turned, and some one outside were pushing it open. Then her attention was attracted by a sort of gurgling noise, and turning, she saw that Moon appeared to be on the verge of a fit of some sort.

"Because," went on Lord Alford, "I have just learnt



307

that a certain Algernon Barker served a term of five years' penal servitude for—forgery! Do you happen to know where he is?"

There was a dead silence, and then the door creaked. They all turned and saw, standing in the doorway, swaying to and fro, a lean, bent figure, pointing at Moon.

"Algernon Barker is there!" said he, hoarsely.

It was Alaric Smith, not dead, but looking scarcely more than half alive.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE surprise, the horror of this return of the dead to life kept all the people in the room in a state of petrified silence for some moments.

It was Gustavus Moon who recovered himself first. Pale as the dead, overwhelmed with confusion and dismay, his fraud discovered, his hopes dashed to the ground, his character exposed, he recognized that immediate flight was his best course.

But as he staggered forward, making not for the door but the window which was open, Lord Alford caught him by the arm, flung him down into a seat, and said—

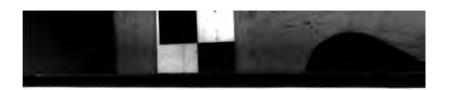
"No, not so fast. We'll have this cleared up first."

In the meantime Alaric Smith, who, although he was not indeed dead, as they had supposed, yet looked as if there was but little life left in him, had come slowly into the room, closing the door carefully behind him, and keeping watch on the doings both of Moon, and of Bridger, who was in a state of great agitation though he kept a wise silence.

Nellie had approached her father, but there was more of dutiful service than of joy in her manner as she led him to a chair.

He laughed to himself, mockingly, harshly, as he sat down, panting with the exertion and excitement he had just undergone.

"Yes, we'll clear this up," he said, as soon as he had recovered breath. "Algernon Barker did serve his five



309

years, or a great part of them, and it was while he was doing time that I made his acquaintance. Eh, Barker?"

Moon glared at him with malignant eyes.

"Yes," said he, speaking very quietly, between his set teeth, "I did serve my term, while you were serving yours; and I did hear you say that when you came out you'd have your revenge on Lord Alford, that you'd shoot him through the head one of these days and be even with him for what he had done to you. Eh, Smith?"

Smith's only answer to this speech was a grim smile, and a scowling look at the Earl, who laughed, and said

carelessly—

"Thanks awfully to you both. You, Smith, for your good intentions, and you, Moon, for making them known to me!" He turned to Nellie, who was standing, in a sort of stupor of bewilderment, by her father's chair. "You won't want me now," he said in a low voice, as he made towards the door. "The intentions of the company towards me don't appear to be any too benevolent, so I think I'd better get away—while I haven't got a bullet in my head!"

Alaric Smith turned to him.

"Why are you here?" he asked shortly.

"Your daughter sent for me."

Smith frowned.

"You see, you had left her without any protector, and she had to take the best she could get. Perhaps, when you next propose to play a trick of this sort, you will make better provision for her."

"I am much obliged to you," said Smith, dryly. "I'm sorry that I can make you no other recompense than a poor man's thanks!" he added with sneering emphasis. "I know there is an impression among you all that I'm not a poor man—"

"And there's an impression also that you're a very rude one," interrupted the Earl, as, still with the utmost

good-humour, and openly holding Nellie's hand as he spoke, he turned his back upon his ungrateful host.

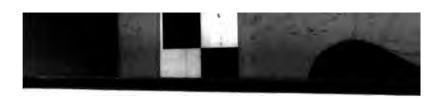
Smith grunted, Gustavus Moon tried to laugh, and Joel Bridger, much annoyed at the turn things were taking, hastened to intercept Lord Alford on his way to the door.

"I assure your lordship," he said earnestly, as he opened the door for him obsequiously, "that all I have had to do in this business was to come and see fair play on behalf of Miss Smith——"

"One moment, Lord Alford," piped Alaric Smith from his chair. "Will you stay and be witness to the truth of this business of the will I have heard so much about? Where is the document?" And he turned and took it from Bridger, to whom the Earl had handed it after his perusal. He ran his eye over the alleged will with a quiet chuckle; while Moon, who had changed his mind about escaping and resolved to face it out, moved restlessly in his chair. "Yes, yes. Very good imitation of my handwriting, very good indeed. It does you great credit, Moon, especially as it must have been done in a hurry. But what are these signatures? These are not forgeries, too, are they? Let us find out. Ring the bell, Nellie."

In answer to the summons, the parlourmaid appeared, pale and whimpering, and the kitchenmaid having been sent for too, the girls both confessed, amid sobs, that Moon had persuaded them to sign a paper which he said would save Mr. Smith's property from going away from Miss Nellie. They were both to say that they signed in Mr. Smith's presence on the seventeenth, whereas, as a matter of fact, they had signed it on the evening of the day when they were told Mr. Smith had died.

Their sincerity was so obvious that it was easy to see how the silly, good-natured girls had let themselves be wheedled by the artful and persuasive Moon into signing the forged document, as witnesses, and both were dismissed from the room with a half-hearted scolding by their master.



311

Moon, meanwhile, sat back in his chair, stretched out his legs, stuck his hands in his pockets, and softly whistled, while Bridger stood, with his head bent, in an attitude of solemn attention to all that passed, and Lord Alford stood by the door, with an occasional sympathetic glance towards Nellie, who was so worn out with surprises and countersurprises that she remained in an apathetic condition behind her father's chair, and heard rather than listened to all that was said.

When the girls had left the room, Lord Alford turned once more to Alaric Smith.

"I think that's all you want of me?" he said, in an offhand, perfunctory tone.

"All," said the ex-convict, emphatically, with scarcely a

glance in his direction.

The Earl opened th

The Earl opened the door with a sarcastically profound bow to his discourteous host, and was halfway across the hall when Nellie, breaking away by force from her father's restraining hand, and not heeding his command to her to stay, came up with him, and said, panting and in a broken voice—

"I can't forgive myself for having exposed you to this. But you will forgive me, I know."

"My dear child, yes. On the whole, it's as well that I should know what I'm in for. Nice crew you've got in there!"

His tone was so full of humour that he almost made Nellie laugh too.

"My father doesn't mean what he says. He pretends to be worse than he is!" she said earnestly.

"I'm sure I hope so," said the Earl, with another comical look. "Nellie, your friends make me feel quite virtuous!"

At that she laughed outright.

"You are everything that is good and noble," she said under her breath.

He patted her on the shoulder.

"That's what I like about you, my child," said he. "You do lay it on thick! When my wife has been assuring me that I'm the lowest thing on earth, I like to come to you and hear that I'm nothing of the kind."

"You know that what I say is nothing but the truth."

"I'm quite ready to believe it. Now, good-bye. If I don't go we shall have our friend Moon accusing you again of flirting with a married man, shan't we?"

"Oh, don't, don't."

"All right. Remember, I don't really care two straws what they say about shooting me. And if there's anything I can do, just write and I'll always do my best."

"I know, I know."

There was that in his straightforward eyes, in the hearty grip of his hand, which comforted the girl and made her feel that, whatever they might say, she had one brain, one heart, and one arm on which she could rely. He got into his phæton and drove away, and she went back, slowly and with hesitating step, to the drawing-room.

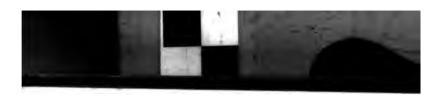
There were voices speaking within, not very loudly. She did not know whether to go in and watch her father, whose condition was evidently serious, and whom she scarcely liked to leave with the two other men, or whether to await his summons.

Her indecision was put an end to by her father, who called to her in a hoarse and feeble voice. On entering, she found that Gustavus Moon had been suffered to take his departure by way of the window, and that Joel Bridger was doing his best to assure Alaric Smith of his own innocence in the matter of the forged will.

"Oh yes," Smith was saying dryly, as Nellie entered, "I know that, if you had had a hand in it, you wouldn't have left yourself out, Bridger."

The solicitor stood up, justly offended.

"Here's your daughter," said he. "I'll leave you with



313

her, and I only hope you will treat her better than you treat the rest of your friends!"

But he contrived to get a few words with Nelllie before he took his leave. Making a sign to her to accompany him to the door, Joel Bridger said, when they stood in the hall together—

"You did wrong in calling in Lord Alford, and some harm will come of it, if you don't take care. Your father has a very strong feeling against him still, and Moon has taken care to make it stronger. Let me warn you not to exasperate him further—for your own sake—and Lord Alford's."

Nellie listened to this advice, not without recognizing the force of it, thanked him, and went back to her father.

Alaric Smith, however, only asked her to send for Mrs. Barr, and all her attempts to soften him towards her by little attentions were in vain. Indeed, it seemed that he looked at her with a certain malignity, as if he felt that she took the side of the enemy against him.

He retired almost at once to his own room; and Mrs. Barr, who owned to having helped him to play the trick by which he had discovered Moon's intentions, and to having been a party to the stratagem by which he had passed himself off to his own daughter as dead, took her place as nurse as before.

Nellie was again left to pass the time by herself, and to wonder why her father had thought it worth while to play this trick, only to satisfy himself of what he might have known: that Moon cared for nothing but his own interests.

Although he had now been exposed, both to Joel Bridger and to the Earl, as a convicted forger, Nellie felt an ugly presentiment that she had not seen the last of the adventurer. Although her father was still alive, it was evident that he had not very long to live; and she had a

strong suspicion that, having failed in one endeavour to help himself to the property of his late fellow-convict, Moon would try another.

The evening was close and oppressive after an unusually hot day. Every window in the house was open, and so was the front door when, between seven and eight o'clock, Nellie, attracted, on the other side of the gravelled space in front of the house, by the scent of the night-scented stocks, as she crossed the hall, was in the act of stepping out in the glow of the sunset when she found herself face to face with Gustavus Moon.

He was as pale as ever, and there was an expression on his features new and alarming. He was wearing a long light overcoat over his usual grey suit, and his right hand was thrust deep into one of the pockets.

"Ah, Miss Nellie, I am glad to have met you," said he.

"I want to speak to you."

He had deftly got between her and the door as he spoke.

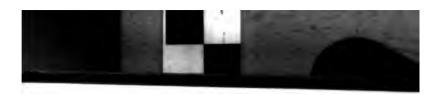
"Don't you think, after this morning—" she began.

He interrupted her.

- "Do you think that the fact that I have been a convict makes me unfit to speak to you, the daughter of another convict?" he asked sharply.
 - "Oh no, no. But-"
- "Then listen to me. I only forged that will in order to get a hold upon your affections by giving up to you what was, in reality, not mine to give."

"I can't believe, that, Mr. Moon."

"I tell you it's true, and you shall believe it. How is it you can believe anything that confounded spendthrift and neer-do-well Alford says to you, while you won't hear a word from me? I tell you I love you passionately, that I can't live without you. Whether you have your father's money or whether you give it all up is the same to me. It



315

is you, you only I care for, I must have. And if you won't give me your word to marry me, or at least to let me come and see you, I swear I'll put a bullet through my own head before your eyes!"

And as he spoke, to the girl's unutterable horror, he drew a revolver from his pocket and placed the muzzle

of it against his right ear.

She drew back with a cry. Moon came down the step and advanced towards her. But she, taking advantage of the movement which left the doorway free, darted past him into the house, slammed the great heavy front door, and stood, panting and safe, trembling from head to foot, in the shelter of the hall.

"Open the door," hissed Moon, angrily, but not very

loudly. "Or I'll put a bullet through the panels."

She glanced at the door, which was exceptionally heavy and solid, and made no answer, feeling sure that his threat was one he could not carry out. A little sigh of relief escaped her lips. To Moon, listening at the keyhole, it sounded like a laugh of defiance.

"By Jove, you'd better open!" cried he, between his

set teeth.

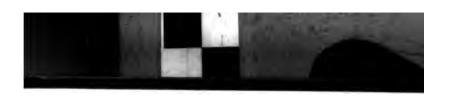
And the next moment she heard the sound of a bullet crashing into the wood above her head. The door shook, and she stood back in amazement. Still she felt no fear that he would be able to pierce the wood of the door, and she waited, well back in the corner, wondering whether disappointed greed had driven him mad.

There was another little crash, another rattle, and to Nellie's unutterable astonishment, a long splinter of the wood of the door fell out into the hall.

It fell to the floor with a little noise. She glanced down in stupefaction, as she saw something dazzlingly bright roll flashing along the floor into the warm sunset light which streamed through the staircase window.

It lay like a huge dewdrop, sparkling on the floor. Then Nellie uttered a sort of wailing/sob and stooped down, gazing with all her eyes.

For it was the Countess's diamond that lay on the floor at her feet.



CHAPTER XXXV

SCARCELY had Nellie uttered her cry, half of delight, and half of horror, at the sight of the diamond, when she heard the voice of Moon again addressing her from outside the door.

"What is it? What is it? I haven't hurt you, have I? Open the door, for Heaven's sake!"

But she paid no heed. She picked up the flashing jewel with hands moist and clammy with excitement, and stared at it with glistening eyes.

Yes, it was the big diamond, without any doubt, the diamond which had excited so many evil passions and the loss of which had done so much harm to the Carrington family.

If only she could give it back to Lord Alford, she would have done something to repay him for his forbearance, for his kindness, something in atonement for the wrong her father had done. But how? Not only her father, but Moon had to be avoided, if she was to be successful in her expedition.

So eagerly was she bent upon this act of restitution, and the means to accomplish it, that she did not at first understand, or even try to understand, how it was that the jewel had thus miraculously come into her possession. It was only when she heard Moon rattling the door from the outside, and again asking her to admit him, that she looked at the splintered wood, and suddenly realized the astounding

fact that it was in the very door itself that the diamond had been hidden.

Placing the jewel in her pocket, she hurriedly examined the panels of the door, and discovered that in the middle, just where the wood was thickest, it had been hollowed out, and the space thus made covered with a sliding panel, so exactly resembling the rest of the door that nobody could have guessed the truth.

The wood, however, having been weakened by this hollowing out, the bullet from Moon's revolver had pierced the outer side, and forcing the sliding panel out of its socket, had cause the hidden jewel to fall out with it upon the floor.

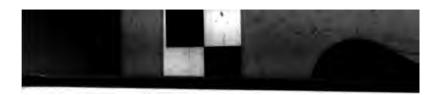
The ingenuity of this hiding-place, even at that moment, struck Nellie with a sort of awe. Surely nobody else in the world but her clever, cunning father, would ever have thought of such a hiding-place for the treasure! One that might have remained undiscovered for fifty years, but for the strange accident of Moon's mad freak.

She remembered how she had found her father hovering about the front door on the night when her unexpected appearance had angered him to the point of causing him to thrust her out-of-doors. No doubt he had been assuring himself of the safety of the gem.

She remembered too how, on his first return home from Parkhurst Prison, it was to the hall that he went first, no doubt for the same reason.

While she was looking at the splintered panel, and touching the broken wood with cautious fingers, she heard footsteps and the opening of the drawing-room door; and with a fast-beating heart she drew back a step, and found herself, as she had expected, forced to meet Gustavus Moon once more. She had forgotten the open window of the drawing-room, through which he had made his entrance when she refused to admit him by the door.

He looked at her curiously, not at first noting anything



319

beyond the fact that she looked flushed and much excited. Evidently the shattering of the wood of the door had had no special significance for him.

But a second look at her seemed to awake his suspicions, and he was coming nearer to her, nearer to the door, and glancing at the splinter of wood which she was holding, and which she let fall to the floor, when Mr. Smith's voice rang out sharply from above.

"Who's that at the door? What's that noise?"

The next moment the invalid, wrapped in his dressing-gown, shaking and stumbling, came quickly along the corridor to the head of the stairs. Moon stepped back from the door, and looked up at him, perceiving that there was something here of great moment, something that he could not understand.

As he looked up, he suddenly saw Alaric Smith's face grow ashy white, his eyes seem to protrude from his livid face, his whole countenance to become transformed with unspeakable terror. Moon rushed up the stairs to his assistance, believing that he was in danger of falling headlong down the staircase.

Nellie cowered in a corner of the hall for one moment. Then, watching her chance, as her father, unable to articulate, struggled feebly in the arms of Moon, who supported him, and thus unintentionally hid Nellie from view, she crept hurriedly along the corridor towards the study, opened the door of that room, crossed it quickly, and getting out of the window, ran across the paddock at the back of the house, and over the fields, as fast as her feet could carry her.

Meanwhile Alaric Smith was recovering his breath, his power of speech, and thrusting Moon aside, he stared at the front door, through the upper part of which he could see the light.

"Get out of the way," said he, hoarsely. "Let me go downstairs. I'm all right—all right. What was that noise?"

As he spoke he freed himself from Moon's supporting arms, and helping himself along by the banisters, got to the bottom step, and remained there for one moment, staring before him with haggard eyes.

Then slowly, with a sort of dazed look, he looked around him, and, as if suddenly becoming aware of the young man's presence, said—

"Where did you come from? What have you been doing? What was that noise I heard at—at—at the front door?"

"Your daughter refused to let me in. I put a bullet through the door; I only did it to frighten her. She was not hurt. I swear she was not hurt!"

But Alaric Smith put a shaking hand up to his forehead.

"No, no, of course she wasn't hurt," he said, grinding out the words in a tone of savage displeasure. "Where—where is she?"

His forehead was wet and glistening, his mouth dry and parched. So far from looking again at the splintered door, he kept his eyes studiously away from it, and stealthily looking round about him on the floor, peered and peeped about him with a hungry yet veiled interest.

Moon looked round him.

"She was here a moment ago," said he. "She was standing in that corner."

Alaric Smith drew himself up, his eyes full of a strange, savage light.

"Look for her. Call her," said he. "I must speak to her at once."

His tone was so imperious, his voice had become so suddenly strong, that Moon at once obeyed, and opening the nearest door, that of the drawing-room, looked in, calling to Nellie.

He had been too much occupied with the sudden apparition of Alaric Smith to notice what became of the girl; all



he knew was that she could not have gone upstairs, as she would have had to pass him and her father.

She was not in the drawing-room, so he came out again, and went down the corridor towards the other rooms, calling as he went.

He had reached the third door when a hoarse cry, almost a yell, from Alaric Smith made him turn and run back into the hall. The ex-convict, shaking and writhing as if in a fit, but upright and with widely-staring eyes, was leaning against the hall-table, gasping and cursing.

"Gone! Gone! My diamond! My diamond! Mine that I gave seven years of my life for. Curse her, curse her!"

Suddenly he became aware that there was another face in front of his, another pair of ears listening to his words. Seizing Moon by the arm with a grip that left a blue mark on the flesh, he hissed out hoarsely—

"Find her, find her!"

Moon was by this time as much excited as he.

"The diamond!" cried he, not very loudly, but with intense eagerness. "Has your daughter got the diamond?" "Hush!"

Recovering himself a little, though his body still shook and his hands were still clammy and deathly cold. Alaric Smith, who perceived that all chance of keeping his secret hidden any longer was gone, and that he must now have a confederate to defeat Nellie's fatal intentions, drew him towards the damaged front door, and pointed to the aperture in the wood.

"It was there," he said, in a husky whisper, "there I hid it, there that it's been lying all these years, hidden in the very wood of the door! Curse her and you too. What folly made you shoot?"

"I was mad. I wanted to frighten her, to force her to hear me," said Moon, in a tone scarcely more composed than his. "Have you looked about you well?"

321

"Yes, yes. I've looked in every corner. Find her, find her. Or she'll give it back, give it back! The stone I lost my health for, my best years for!"

He was getting shrill in the agony of his rage, of his disappointment. Moon tried to calm him, drew him into the drawing-room, gave him brandy. Meanwhile he himself was rapidly going over their chances of intercepting Nellie, for he was shrewd enough to guess that the girl was already on her way to Heynes Hall.

"Listen, Smith," said he. "I think we may do it. She is on her way, no doubt, but as she's started on foot, and we've got your car, we've a very good chance of catching

her before it's too late."

"Order the car round at once !" said Smith, eagerly.

Moon rang the bell. He had recovered his coolness, and began to inspire some confidence in the older man, who was broken down by his misfortune, but still more by his impotent passion.

"Will you go, too?" asked Moon.

Smith replied by a nod so emphatic that it was almost contemptuous. Trust another—trust Moon on such an errand! Not he!

They made hasty preparations for their journey, and within twenty minutes they were on their way. Heynes Hall was more than ten miles away by the shortest road, and Nellie could not have got far.

The worst of it was that, as they knew, there was more to be feared than speed on her side. She would guess that she would be pursued, and she might combat their superior speed with superior cunning. They were in for a match of wits.

In dead silence, both sitting in the hind seat, and leaving the chaffeur to drive, they sped through roads and lanes on the exciting chase.

Meanwhile, as Moon had surmised, Nellie had realized at the very outset that she must employ stratagem rather



323

than dash. It was not difficult to foresee that her father and Moon would make common cause, or that they would use the means of rapid locomotion to hand.

How was she to outwit them?

In the first place she had had the sense to start in the opposite direction to that which led to Heynes Hall. Instead of making for the high-road by way of the drive, she had doubled back through the paddock and got into a little by-lane, which led to a point, shaded by trees on both sides, where she could cross the high-road and get into the fields.

She did this successfully, and running across the meadows that she knew, before the car was on its way, she was in the depths of what was to her an unknown country within half an hour.

Darkness was coming on, and it occurred to her that it would be better to get near to the high-road along which they must pass, and to trust being able to hide herself behind the hedge when she heard them coming, than to try to find a parallel course among the little known and desolate fields.

So she drew cautiously back to the direct route, and made her way along as fast as she could, sometimes for a little way in the road itself, sometimes on the other side of the friendly hedge.

Her progress was necessarily slow, and she knew very well that sooner or later they must pass her. Stratagem must be her mainstay to the end.

She had started soon after eight; she could not possibly reach Heynes Hall before eleven. By that time it would be quite dark, and she might fairly hope to avoid them by one ruse or another until she was too close to the house for them to dare to interfere with her. If necessary, she would pass the night in the open air, in the shrubberies about the Hall, and finish her hazardous journey by daylight.

She had scarcely come to this point in her plans when the whir-r of a motor-car reached her ears, and she hid herself, with a wildly beating heart, behind the leafy hedge.

Hardly daring to peep between the branches, she was able to discern the car and to recognize its occupants, and having seen them whirl past her and disappear in a thick cloud of dust, she went on with an easier mind.

A terrible walk it was to the girl, who, burdened with the consciousness that she carried a fortune about her person, saw a thief in every tree, and a would-be murderer in every

rustling branch.

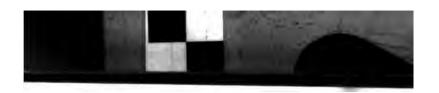
324

When at last she drew near to the grounds of Heynes Hall, after undergoing an age of for the most part causeless terrors, hiding always at the sound of a voice or a footstep, and proceeding all the time with the utmost caution, she felt so sick with excitement and dread that she had to rest a little, sitting on the damp grass of a field, to recover her strength and her self-possession.

Here was the peril of perils; for she could not doubt but that both her father and Moon were in hiding hereabouts, and that at any moment she might fall into the clutches of one or the other.

The road was no longer to be thought of; she must get behind the hedge once more, and stumble along to the great stone wall surrounding the grounds, and take her chance of finding a place where she could climb over.

The white wall gleamed already in the darkness before her; a few more steps and she would have reached it; when all at once she heard a crackling of branches near her; she ran forward, forgetting her caution in her fear. She had scarcely run a dozen steps when she felt herself seized from behind, a hand was put over her mouth as she uttered a shrill scream, and she knew that she was in the grasp of Gustavus Moon.



CHAPTER XXXVI

WHEN Lord Alford reached home after the exciting scene at The Firs, it was six o'clock. Although he had persisted in his refusal to send away his friends at his wife's bidding, and the usual noisy house-party was therefore at the Hall, yet the knowledge that the Countess was in residence there also, although she kept scrupulously and haughtily to her own wing, did not conduce to the enjoyment of either host or guests.

In fact, Lady Alford, even without showing herself, acted effectually as a wet blanket upon the spirits of the whole household, and produced an effect, which, though it might make for decorum, made also for dulness.

The Earl had scarcely alighted and entered the outer hall when he was surprised at meeting the Countess, with an open letter in her hand. She was dressed in elaborate black, glittering all over with jet sequins. In this, with pearls round her throat and many diamond rings on her fingers, she looked dignified and handsome.

"You, Persis!"

"Yes. Is it so very surprising that I should wish to see you for five minutes in the day? I don't think I presume to ask more."

He frowned without answering; for there were servants within hearing, and the hall was scarcely the place for the wrangle which usually ensued on the meeting of husband and wife.

"Will you come to the south wing for five minutes? I really won't detain you longer, really."

"Of course I'm at your disposal for as long as you

please."

He followed her as she swept along the corridor and into a pretty room with cream-coloured walls and cream and gold furniture, her own boudoir. She ran to throw open a window.

"This room seems musty and close. They don't take proper care of it," said she, fretfully, when Lord Alford had helped her to open all the windows on one side, allowing the pleasant evening air to come into the room.

"It's because it's never used," said he. "You are never here, and it was your own wish that none of my friends

should ever enter it."

She turned upon him irritably.

"I shouldn't mind your friends if they were persons who could by any possibility be mine also!" she retorted sharply. "Look here, is this a proper letter for me to find?"

And she held out before his eyes, to his great annoyance, poor Nellie's note asking him to go to The Firs. He snatched it angrily away.

"Is it a proper thing for you to rummage in my desk?" retorted he, with great indignation. "There's no harm whatever in that letter. There's great harm in your taking upon yourself to pry into my correspondence. Why do you do it?"

"Supposing I say that I take as much interest in this girl, this Nellie Smith, as you do, only that my interest is more honourable than yours. What would you say?"

"I should say that it was a lie."

"Thank you. Your language has not improved in the society of your chosen friends. You must please remember that you are not speaking to one of your Mrs. Longs and Miss Daweses now."

327

"I am perfectly aware of that. Let us, please, come to the point. You are displeased because this girl appealed to me, in the belief that her father was dead, to come and take her part in a gathering where she knew she would be surrounded with enemies. I can't see myself what ground of complaint you have. You certainly care no more for this girl's reputation than you do for your own. You must know her, too, to be a good girl, one of the sort of people you despise. You know that she is placed in a terrible position, between the wish to do her duty towards her father, and the wish to atone for his conduct to me. Why can't you leave her alone?"

"Because I know that I'm being deceived," answered Lady Alford, sharply. "You say she is surrounded by enemies, that she has no friend but you. What about her fiance, this Moon. Is he not friend enough for her? Can't

he take her part?"

"No," said Lord Alford, promptly. "He has just proved himself utterly unworthy of her confidence. If you'll keep quiet, and listen to reason, I'll tell you just what has happened, and how it is that the girl had no choice but to apply to me."

Persis sat down and listened, at first with a sulky expression and ungracious manner, but gradually with awakening interest and excitement, to her husband's recital of his adventures at The Firs that afternoon.

When he came to the point of Alaric Smith's return to life, indeed, she rose to her feet, with intense interest; and when she learnt of the trick he had played upon Gustavus Moon, and of his exposure of the will as a forgery, she was scarcely less excited at the narration than those present during the scene had been themselves.

"And the diamond! Was nothing said about the diamond?" asked she breathlessly, when he paused.

"Diamond! Oh no. Nobody knows anything about that, except, perhaps, old Smith himself."

328

"Perhaps! Why, of course he does! Of course he has it hidden, and what we are all trying to do is to discover it and get it for ourselves!" said Persis, eagerly. "That man Bridger, and Gustavus Moon, and the man's daughter, and

you, and I."

"Not I," laughed Lord Alford, contemptuously. "And if you'll take my advice, you'll give up the undignified scramble too, Persis. The old man knew very well what you went to see him for, and he treated you just as he does the rest. Can't you see, after the trick I've just told you of, that he's ten times cleverer than the whole lot of us put together? He looks upon that diamond as his now, and I'm ready to bet that, whether he ever gets any benefit from it or not, he's made up his mind that nobody else shall. And poor Nellie has lost her chance of it by showing plainly that if it fell into her hands it would fall into mine."

"Ah! You admit that!"

"Certainly I do."

"And yet you say there is nothing between you!"

"There's everything between us that there ought to be, and nothing that there ought not," replied he, impatiently. "There's liking, there's gratitude on both sides, and there's nothing more."

"You're in love with her. Don't deny it. You've confessed it before, if not in so many words, yet quite plainly

enough for me."

The Earl faced her very calmly.

"And what if I were? What if this new sort of girl, this sort that respects itself, yet respects the rights of others too, a sort I'm not much accustomed to, should have made me feel something that no woman has ever made me feel before? Am I to blame for that? Am I the less likely to consider you, to consult your feelings and wishes (which I do by leaving you free to wander about in the world in the company of people of whom I disapprove), because I have met one woman in the world who is not ready to sacrifice

329

her self-respect to the first whim that seizes her? Oh yes, Persis, I understand this new jealousy of yours perfectly. You're jealous of Miss Smith, not because you think you have what the world calls cause, but because neither she nor I give you that cause. Because she is above suspicion, you are angry with her. Because you can't suspect, you hate her."

"You have no right to think so highly of any woman but your wife."

"I only wish my wife would give me cause to look upon

her in the same way."

"There! That's a downright insult! I shall write to

my father. I-"

"Oh, don't be absurd. What will he say? What he's said to you a dozen times before, when you've wanted something unreasonable; he'll tell you that I married you to keep my word to him, and that you married me to become Lady Alford, and that neither of us can, in the circumstances, expect to do more than get on with as little friction as possible. I think I keep my share of the bargain; I wish you would keep yours."

"You mean you wish Lwould go away again. So I will, if you'll give me some money. Of course you'll say you haven't any, but I'm sure, if you can keep open house here,

you can spare something for me."

"I give you all I can."

"Oh!" Persis was evidently seized with an idea. "I think I'll go and condole with Miss Smith on her father's coming to life again. No, I don't mean condole, I mean congratulate, of course."

"Pray, pray, Persis, be persuaded to behave decently, and leave the people at The Firs alone. You'll not get the diamond; you'll get nothing but snubs, and you'll deserve

them."

"You told me I was free to wander over the world as I pleased. Well, I choose to wander to The Firs. Don't be

afraid. I'm going to make myself agreeable, very agreeable, to mademoiselle as well as to papa!"

"If it were of the least use forbidding you, I would forbid you to go," said the Earl, angrily.

Persis shrugged her shoulders.

330

"But it isn't, you see," she retorted, as she went out of the room.

The Earl remained hesitating by one of the windows, through which a beautiful scene of undulating landscape, handsome trees and brilliant flowers met his eyes. But he saw nothing of it all. A vague unrest, a sense of having missed something, something of what was best, came into his heart and shut out all else. That one thing was sympathy: he had never had it from his wife, never from any of the rollicking acquaintances with whom he had surrounded himself. He was not quite sure, as he stood there, what it was he had missed, but he only knew that the consciousness was a new thing, and that it was associated with a look he had seen in the eyes of a bit of a girl. And he knew also that it was not for him.

Two hours later he saw, rattling down the drive at a rapid pace, Lady Alford in her motor-car, and he turned away with an exclamation of impatience, wondering what mischief she was going to make now.

Persis had a very clearly defined object in this hurried journey. It seemed evident, from her husband's description, that Alaric Smith, though not dead, was rapidly dying, and now that Moon had fallen into discredit both with father and daughter, what more likely than that the offer she proposed to renew, of becoming Nellie's guardian, would receive more attention than before?

With this idea Persis hurried through her dinner, and when, after a rapid run, the car drew up at the lodge-gates, which were shut, she was in a high state of excitement.

Mrs. Barr ran out with a white face.

"Oh, my lady," she cried, without attempting to open

331

the gates, looking up at the lady with eyes full of alarm, "there ain't nobody up at the house, and the door's been broken in, leastways shot through, my lady, and—and we can't find Miss Nellie anywhere; and Mr. Smith and Mr. Moon have gone out together in the motor-car."

"Gone out!" echoed Persis, sharply, wondering whether

this was flight.

"Yes, my lady. There's been strange doings here altogether, what with Mr. Smith pretending he was dead, and then coming to life again sudden to-day, when the Earl was here, my lady, as p'raps you know."

"Yes, I've heard all about that," said Persis, querulously, feeling that her errand had been in vain. "Do you know where they've gone to, Mr. Smith and Mr.

Moon?"

"Well, I think, my lady, they're after finding Miss Nellie. By what I could catch, they thought as how she'd run away with something, jewellery or something of that Something silly like that, I think I heard Mr. Moon say."

Persis sat up. Jewellery could only mean one thingthe diamond. And if Nellie had by any lucky or unlucky chance got hold of it, Heynes Hall would be the place to which she would go straightway. Only one question more

did Persis ask.

"When did the gentlemen start?"

"About an hour ago, or perhaps a little more, my lady. It was just after eight."

Persis looked at her watch. It was a little after nine. She remembered passing a motor-car shortly after leaving Heynes Hall, but it passed like a flash, both cars being at full speed, and she, little guessing that the occupants could be of interest to her, had taken no note of them. Were they Smith and his companion?

Hastily thanking Mrs. Barr for her information, she drove back to the Hall at a speed which made it lucky for

332

her there were no police-traps about. It was ten o'clock when she got back, and she at once sought her husband, and told him what she had learnt.

He agreed with her in thinking the matter was serious, and in concluding that Nellie must be on her way to the Hall, if there was any truth in the rumour about jewellery.

At once he left the house and started in the direction of The Firs, in the hope of meeting the girl. Unluckily, he assumed she would come by way of a short cut which he knew well, but of which, as he afterwards learnt, she was entirely ignorant.

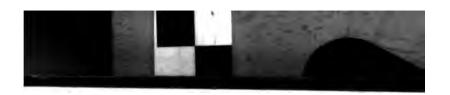
The consequence was that he walked quite half the distance over the fields, calling to her by name from time to time, but without any success, and that at last, feeling that he was on a wrong tack, and with his heart torn with fears on her account, none the less strong that they were somewhat vague, he retraced his steps at a rapid pace, and reached the grounds of Heynes Hall again at about midnight, in a state of the utmost anxiety.

That Nellie should have struggled to restore the jewel, that she should have stumbled along for these dreary miles in the darkness, and that perhaps in the end she should have been discovered by the rascal Moon, robbed and perhaps attacked by him, was an idea so full of horror that the other issue, the fate of the diamond, scarcely occurred to his mind.

He had reached the side-gate of the park, and was fitting a key into the lock, when he heard voices, speaking in low and frightened tones, within the walls.

"It's no use, no use. She's dead, dead without a doubt."

It was the voice of one of his own servants. Lord Alford could scarcely open the gate. When he had got within the wall he saw, by the light of a couple of wavering lanterns, a group of his own servants, bending



333

and leaning over a woman who was lying at full length on the grass.

"What-has-happened?" said he, hoarsely.

The party sprang up with low cries.
"Oh, my lord, my lord," said one, in a whisper of horror; "she's dead, quite dead!"

CHAPTER XXXVII

DEAD! Nellie dead! It could not be true!

Lord Alford dashed forward into the little group, and all of those who were on their feet drew away in respectful sympathy. Only the housekeeper, on her knees on the ground beside the dead woman, remained.

"Oh, my lord, my lord, it's too true, I'm afraid!"

But Lord Alford remained immovable, staring down with eyes which scarcely seemed to see. He was stupefied, stunned.

For the woman who lay on the ground was not Nellie, but his own wife.

After a few moments, during which a sort of cold horror, a numb incredulity, kept him spellbound, he roused himself sufficiently to fall on one knee beside the body, to take one of the limp hands, to look into the poor, distorted face. For distorted it was, as if by intense suffering.

"My poor, poor Persis—Persis!" He repeated the name, as if it had suddenly struck him afresh as impossible that the woman who, an hour or two before, was squabbling with him in full vitality, could be so soon past speech, and hearing, and understanding, and out of his reach for ever. Then, recollecting himself, and waking to the knowledge that he was not alone with the dead, he asked almost under his breath—

"Who-who did it? Who-murdered her?"

"Oh, my lord, I don't know. Nobody knows! My lady went out, soon after you did, my lord, on foot. And about half

335

an hour ago the man at the lodge heard what he took to be a woman's cries coming from the shrubbery behind his place. And he went with a lantern to look, and it was he who found my lady, lying here, just like this! And he called us out, my lord, and went for the doctor. But it's too late. Oh, my lord, you can see it's too late!"

He knew that. There was no possibility of mistaking the signs of death, no possibility, either, of accounting for the manner of it. For there was no sign of blood, no appearance of any struggle. Some trimming was indeed torn away from the front of her bodice, but he found a scrap of it in one of her clenched hands. She must have torn it off herself.

The mystery grew deeper than ever. And when the doctor arrived, a few minutes later, and made a brief examination of the remains of the unfortunate lady before ordering her removal to the mansion, he could give no suggestion whatever to account for her death. There was absolutely no mark of any blow, no sign of fingers on her throat, nothing but the distorted face, the clenched hands, as indications that she had suffered before she died.

It was not until the dead body of Persis had been laid upon the bed of her own room, that the doctor was able, after a more detailed examination, to make a definite suggestion.

Had Lady Alford been known to suffer from a weak heart?

He learnt in reply that this was one of many things of which she had complained. Although never actually ill, Lady Alford had been one of those women who cultivate the character of semi-invalid, while able to enjoy the pleasures of life so intensely that none of her acquaintances ever felt sure whether the character was assumed or not.

There were, the doctor thought, evidences of a weak heart, and of the injurious habit of tight lacing. And he was strongly inclined, in the absence of any mark whatever

of a blow or a struggle of any kind, to think that she must have had some fright, that she had been running away from some one, or running towards something which had excited her attention, and that the sudden strain put upon the heart, combined with the effect of the tightly laced bodice, had caused her death.

Lord Alford heard this suggestion without surprise.

"I think that may be so," he said gravely. "She had been in a state of great excitement throughout the evening, and it is quite possible she may have seen something in the park which alarmed her. I will have the grounds searched at once."

He was glad to have something to do. The shock of his wife's most sudden death had been greater, perhaps, than if they had lived together on good terms. Not that his sorrow was deeper, nor that he had any cause for remorse in thinking of her. But the sudden and tragic disappearance of this constantly jarring element in his life filled him with a sort of consternation which took the place, and even the appearance, of the deepest grief.

He did not know whether he was deeply interested or not. But he knew that he was greatly shocked.

Then his thoughts reverted to the errand on which Persis had gone out to meet her death. She was looking for the bearer of the Countess's diamond, hoping to waylay Nellie, if indeed the girl were on the way to Heynes Hall with the jewel, and to induce her to give to her the diamond on which so many hopes had been fixed.

This indeed was exactly what had happened. Lady Alford had been in the grounds, on the look-out for the approach of Alaric Smith's daughter, when her attention had been attracted by a stifled cry from outside the wall which surrounded the park. Hastily going in the direction from which the sound came, and hearing the muffled cry repeated, she had distinguished the voice of Nellie Smith, and had distinctly heard her say—



337

"Don't take it. Oh, don't, don't! It is Lord Alford's. It is not yours. You can't take it, you shan't!"

Then there was a stifled, gurgling sound, and Lady Alford heard a heavy fall. A moment later she saw a man climb over the wall, and come towards her.

She knew that it was Gustavus Moon, and her first thought was that he was bringing the jewel to her. But the next moment she was undeceived. He suddenly perceived her, and at once set off running at a great rate, making for the south side of the park.

"Mr. Moon, Mr. Moon, don't you know me? It's I, it's Lady Alford," cried Persis.

But the more loudly she called, the faster he ran; and she, realizing that he had got the diamond, and that he intended to appropriate it, started at once in hot pursuit, crying "Help! Help!" as she ran, in the hope of attracting attention from some of the gardeners or servants.

But this part of the grounds was far away from the house, and every step took both pursuer and pursued further from it. Persis redoubled her speed; but the faster she ran, the faster ran Moon, till at length, panting, gasping, and suffering already from the strain of the unusual effort, she saw that he was again approaching the wall, and recognized the fact that a few more steps would take him out of her reach.

For he could climb, and she could not.

No longer crying out, realizing how hopeless it was to rely upon any efforts but her own, the unfortunate lady gathered up her failing strength for one more effort, and succeeded in gaining so much upon Moon, who had to hesitate for a moment to peer in the darkness for a suitable spot at which to get over the wall, that, with a last frantic rush forward, she almost touched the thief as he reached the wall.

But not quite.

With one vigorous leap, Moon got a footing on the

rough stones, and clutched the worn coping. He heard the lady's wailing, gasping cry, and the sound filled him with terror. Scarcely master of himself in his frenzied anxiety to escape and in the dread he felt that Lady Alford would be even with him after all, Gustavus Moon made another effort, a clumsy one, to get over the wall, overbalanced himself, and fell heavily on the other side, with one arm, the right, bent under him.

A shock of intense and vivid agony told him that the limb was broken.

But Lady Alford was unable to take advantage of his misfortune, even if she had been aware of it. Exhausted by her efforts, recognizing already in the agony she was suffering, in a choking sensation which seemed to travel from her throat down to her heart, in the trembling of her limbs and in the fight for breath which made her face wet and her eyes glassy, that there was a worse enemy than Moon upon her track, she staggered away from the wall, her ears deaf to the sounds uttered by the fallen man, her eyes filled with a mist in which the black forms of the great trees of the park danced like weird giants about her.

She was dying, and she knew it.

Putting one hand up to her throat, she tore away part of her pretty glistening black dress, clutching madly at the stuff in the attempt to get air, air, more air.

But her feeble attempts were all in vain. Only a handful of the flimsy overdress came away in her hand; and closely imprisoned in a gown which had been one of the triumphs of a much-advertised Parisian dressmaker, Lady Alford fell fainting to the ground. There, helpless and alone, after a vain attempt to crawl in the direction of the house and to call for the assistance which she knew could not come, the poor butterfly sighed out the last breaths of her useless and sorry little life.

In the meantime Nellie, stunned by the force which Moon used, when he had obtained possession of the diamond

339

which the unhappy girl had carried in the front of her dress, and the whereabouts of which she had betrayed by a frantic clutch when he attacked her from behind, was lying unconscious on the ground outside the wall of the park.

It was her cries which attracted the attention of the lodge-keeper; but as by the time he came out of his cottage they sunk into silence, he was unable to ascertain the direction whence they had come. He therefore went back into the lodge, got a lantern, and proceeded to search within the park walls for some trace of the disturbance or assault which he felt sure must have taken place.

By this time, however, Moon and Lady Alford had got so far away that for a long time he could hear nothing; and even when at length a faint cry came to his ears, he was so uncertain from which quarter it came that he got reinforcements from the house and stables to help him in his search.

Whether they were just too late to save her, or whether death had been inevitable from the first moment of the attack, no one could certainly say. All that they could tell was that when they found the body of Lady Alford lying in an attitude of agony and struggle on the grass under a great oak tree, the life had gone out of it.

In the mean time there was yet another pair of ears upon which the faint sounds indicative of some disturbance came with startling effect. Alaric Smith had had his motor-car taken past the lodge-gates of Heynes Hall, and waited in a dark corner by the roadside while Gustavus Moon took upon himself the task of waylaying Nellie and obtaining the diamond from her.

It was not without misgiving that Smith left this part of the work to the younger man; but he was physically unequal, after the excitement of the day, to the fatigue and exertion which a possible chase would entail, and he was, moreover, so much troubled by his cough that for him to attempt to conceal his whereabouts, which might be necessary, would have been fruitless.

He enjoined Moon to be firm but gentle; to demand the jewel, and, in the event of her refusing to give it up, to call him to the rescue.

Now, Alaric Smith's confidence in Moon was very small, but he reckoned that the value of the motor-car, as a means of escape from the dangerous neighbourhood of Heynes Hall, would counterbalance any desire the younger knave might have to keep the diamond to himself.

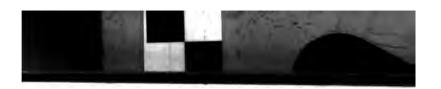
Smith, knowing the game to be a waiting one, and explaining the delay to the chauffeur by the story that his daughter had "run away again," had stayed patiently in the car for nearly two hours before he heard these faint cries. Though they were really uttered by Lady Alford on the south side of the park, he took them to be those of Nellie, on the north side, that is to say, the side by which she, coming from The Firs, would have to approach Heynes Hall.

Getting out of the car, he at once made his way past the park gates, and, finding no trace of his daughter on the road, he presently searched the fields on either side, and came upon what he at first believed to be her lifeless body.

At once he knew that Moon had been guilty of foul play. And half distracted between the belief that Nellie had been murdered and the certainty that she had been robbed of the great diamond, he filled the air with frantic cries for assistance, which for a long time met with no response.

At last, however, a voice answered his with a shout, and Alaric Smith, recognizing that the tones were those of his arch-enemy, the Earl of Alford, stood up, hesitating between his greed and his natural love for his daughter.

If the stone were still in her possession, he should undoubtedly lose it if the girl were carried into the house of its rightful owner, the very man to whom she had been bringing it.



341

If, on the other hand, he had no help, she might die—if indeed she were not dead, unless he got assistance.

While he stood hesitating, however, Lord Alford himself, with a couple of servants carrying lanterns in the rear, came in sight.

At the same moment Nellie moved, raising her head ever so slightly, and dropping it again with a sigh.

Alaric Smith was on his knees beside her at once, pouring questions into her ear.

Then he found himself pulled aside with no gentle hand, and saw Lord Alford, grave and stern and strong, standing over him.

"Leave her alone," said the Earl, sharply. "She is in no fit state to be questioned now. Go back, Mr. Smith, to your home. We will look after your daughter."

The ex-convict stood dazed and irresolute, for one moment only. Then another ugly suspicion having come into his mind, he made a gesture of assent to the Earl's words, and hobbled away as fast as his legs would carry him, to the spot where he had left his motor-car.

Long, long he searched, with the veins swelling on his forehead and his breath coming in short gasps. And at last the conviction gained upon him that it was gone, and that Gustavus Moon had not only stolen the great diamond from Nellie, but had escaped with it on the very car which had brought him and his confederate to this fatal spot.

For the first time Alaric Smith, gnashing his teeth, recognized that the tables had been turned.



CHAPTER XXXVIII

LORD ALFORD remained standing at a little distance from Nellie, as the girl, roused from the stupor in which she had lain, struggled into a sitting position and stared about her without realizing what had happened or where she was.

The Earl's heart beat faster when he saw her move, and knew that she was unhurt. He dared not approach, dared not even speak to her. He felt, in some vague way, as if the shadow of poor dead Persis stood between him and the girl.

The servants drew a little nearer, waiting for orders.

He spoke without turning.

"Go and ask—ask Lady Alicia to come here. Tell her

to bring her maid. And—some water."

Nellie heard the voice, and shivered. She was as yet only half-conscious of what was passing around her, and though the voice recalled vague memories to her mind, it did not dispel the clouds that still hung over it. She remained quite still for a moment, and then turned her head in the direction of the Earl.

"Who is it?" she asked faintly.

And then she put up her hand to her head and uttered a little moan.

"You are in pain?" said Lord Alford, gently, coming a little nearer and bending down, as he took the lantern from the servant, and looked into her face.

She bowed her head without looking up.

"My head," she answered wearily; "it aches, it throbs

343

and feels as if-" then she paused, a sort of shock seemed to pass through her, and she clutched the front of her bodice with a trembling hand. "The diamond!" cried she, in a voice of intense misery and distress. "It's gone! After all this time—after all I hoped—after—after all, it's gone, gone!" Before he could speak to her in an attempt at comfort, she suddenly struggled to her feet, and cried. "It was Gustavus Moon! Go after him, stop him! stop him! Tell the Earl to stop him! Tell-"

She had begun herself to try to run, but her limbs failed her and she staggered. Then Lord Alford put out his hand and supported her, saying gently-

"It's all right. He knows all about it. Lord Alford

knows."

The touch, the tone, affected her at once. Looking up in his face, at first wildly, the look of dismay and pain gradually gave place to an expression of calmness and ease, and heaving a deep sigh, she bent her head again, and whispered—

"It was of no use, no use. But I did try. Oh, I did

try hard!"

All the ghastly incidents of the evening lost their poignancy in an overwhelming sense of tenderness and pity for the poor girl, who had been through so much in her attempt to restore to him what was his.

He dared not trust himself to speak. Though the servant who had held the lantern had retired, and they were alone together, there was a terrible shadow hanging over them which forbade him to utter the words of kindness and of gratitude which were in his heart. Between his longing to comfort her, and the sense that a cloud lay over them, he could only say gently—

"Hush, don't worry yourself about it. Nobody cares

but you."

It was the voice rather than the words, which perhaps she hardly yet understood, that soothed the girl.

allowed him to lead her to the lodge, where she was given a glass of water, and suffered to lie on the little horsehair sofa until Lady Alicia arrived from the house, followed by her maid with restoratives.

The poor lady was in a state of the utmost agitation on account of the tragedy which had just occurred; and it is doubtful whether she did not consider the appearance of the ex-convict's daughter at such a juncture a more terrible thing than the tragic death of Persis.

She drew her nephew aside to whisper to him her fears.

"You should have sent for me at once, Jack," she said, "without so much as speaking to the girl yourself. Look what people will say, when it's known that you were out here talking to her within an hour of the discovery of your wife's death!"

Lord Alford retorted impatiently-

"Do you think we ought to care for such considerations as that, when this unfortunate girl has been half-murdered, while on her way to my house to do me the greatest service in her power?"

"What was that?"

"She was trying to give me back the big diamond, and it was not her fault that she didn't succeed."

"Oh, Jack!"

344

"It's true. She was knocked down and robbed, almost under my very walls."

This put another matter, far more important than the condition of the girl, into his aunt's head.

"And who's got it? Where is he? Have you found him?"

Lord Alford shook his head impatiently.

"I neither know nor care where it is," said he. "It is probably where it's been for a long time, in the hands of one or other of a group of precious rogues."

"And aren't you going to send for the police, to—to

—to have him found, and the diamond restored?" cried the

345

little lady, clinging almost hysterically to his arm.

"I'm going to set the police to look for the rascal who knocked down this poor girl," retorted Lord Alford. as for the stone, surely you don't suppose we shall ever get it back? I tell you it's gone past hope, and the sooner you all give up hoping for it, as I have done, the better it will be for the family dignity."

"But think what it would do for us!"

They were in the passage of the lodge, where Lady Alicia had insisted upon interviewing her nephew while her maid administered restoratives to Nellie in the little parlour.

Before Lady Alicia could say more, there stole out of the front room a wan-faced, staggering creature, with imploring eyes. It was Nellie, white, feeble, but resolute. She had recovered her wits, and was overwhelmed by the news she had just heard.

Looking from the one to the other, and speaking in a quavering voice, while the tears ran down her cheeks, she said-

"Oh, isn't it dreadful, dreadful! Poor Lady Alford! When she was so pretty, so bright! I—I can't believe it, I can't, I can't!"

The evident sincerity of the simple words, the stupefying effect the news had had upon her, softened even Lady Alicia. She put out a kind hand and touched the girl's trembling fingers.

"There, there, child, it's very, very dreadful; but, after all, it doesn't concern you!" she whispered, with rather

awkwardly worded consolation.

Absolutely without self-consciousness, Nellie turned to Lord Alford.

"As for you, I can't thank you for your goodness in thinking about me when you are in such sorrow yourself," he said gratefully. "I shall never, never forget it, never!"

Lady Alicia intercepted her nephew's hand as it was outstretched eagerly towards the girl.

"And what are you going to do now, my dear?" she

asked hastily. "You will want to get back home."

"No, she won't," interrupted the Earl, in a decided tone. "It's about the last thing she'll want to do. Take her up to the house, and let her get a good night's rest in the first place."

" "My dear," said Lady Alicia, in a warning undertone.

Without in the least understanding the thoughts in the elder lady's mind, Nellie was quick-witted enough to perceive that she would do better to decline this invitation. But Lord Alford, in his kind-hearted, blundering, masculine way, persisted.

"I tell you she must stay. Where could you go, child, if you left us? Not home to The Firs, to be worried by

your father?"

"Where is he?" asked Nellie, with a sudden half-remembrance of hearing him speak to her, scold her. "I—I think, Lord Alford, he is somewhere near, somewhere close by. Didn't I hear hear him speak to me, just now, before you came?"

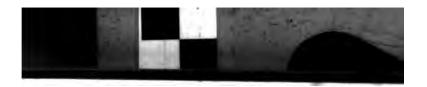
The Earl hesitated. Remembering the fierce tone and manner of Alaric Smith in addressing his unfortunate daughter, he dreaded letting the girl get again into the power of the desperate and disappointed man. He knew, as well as Nellie, that Moon had got away with the stone, and that in so doing, the forger had tricked the thief.

Even while he hesitated, however, Nellie, who was standing close to the open door of the lodge, heard her father's step outside the gates.

"There he is !" said she. "I must go to him."

There was more of duty than affection in her voice, and Lord Alford whispered pityingly, "Poor child!"

The words, the tone, brought the first touch of red colour to Nellie's cheek.



"Thank you. Good-bye," said she, and held out her hand.

He held it in his own, which trembled.

"Remember, Nellie, if you want help, send to me, always to me."

There were tears in her eyes as she bowed her head slowly, and ran out. But Lord Alford followed.

Alaric Smith was questioning the lodge-keeper when his daughter came out.

"I'm here, father."

"Oh!" said he, in a sharp tone of displeasure. "Where have you been? And with whom?"

"She has been with my aunt and me, Mr. Smith," said the Earl, in a very cold tone. "The question is what you are going to do with her."

"I'm going to make her walk back home with me, in the first place," replied Smith, dryly.

"Walk back? She can't walk ten miles. I will send my car down, if you haven't got your own."

"Oh no," cried the girl. "Thanks," said the father; both in the same breath.

It was torture to Nellie to know that not only she, but the father who had just been trying to prevent her act of restitution, should be indebted once more to the kindness of the man he had wronged so much. But there was no help for it. Alaric Smith had no scruples; and when the car came down to the lodge-gates, he got in quite briskly, and insisted upon Nellie's doing the same.

The drive back was almost a silent one. It was obvious that they could not discuss the night's adventures in the hearing of Lord Alford's chauffeur; and therefore Nellie, whose aching head throbbed as they were whirled through the night-air, got a much needed interval of rest before she was forced to submit to her father's interrogatories once more.

Alaric Smith dismissed the car at the entrance to the

348

drive. Then he turned upon his daughter with a savage question—

"What have you done with my diamond?"

Nellie answered with spirit.

"I was taking Lord Alford's diamond back to him when Gustavus Moon attacked me. He must have stolen it from me. It is gone."

He seized her arm, and she was astonished at the strength of his grip.

"What persuaded you to be such a fool? If you had wanted to restore it you should have made terms."

"No," said the girl, stubbornly. "It was not mine, it was not yours. It was the Canningtons' diamond; I am not a thief."

He was glaring into her face, and shaking her arm savagely, when his attention was suddenly distracted by one of Mrs. Barr's young sons, who ran out of the lodge towards them, crying—

"Oh, sir, is it you—and Miss Nellie? Mr. Moon said

as how you wouldn't be back till morning!"

"Mr. Moon said!" echoed Alaric Smith, sharply.

"Yes, sir. He's doing nicely, sir. But my, he did frighten us when he looked so white!"

Alaric Smith pressed his hand firmly on Nellie's arm to keep her quiet.

"When and how did he come back?" he asked quietly.

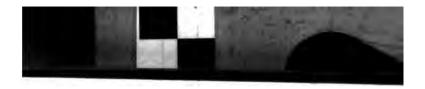
"About half an hour ago, sir. He said as how, when he broke his arm——"

"Ah! Yes, yes. Go on."

"As how you told him to go on, and not to mind about you, sir. And he called at the doctor's and had it set, sir; and then he came on here."

"I see. Thanks. Good night."

Then he and his daughter walked up the drive in dead silence until they came to the house, where the car was waiting before the door.



349

"We'll go in by the back door," he said in a low voice. Then going up to the chauffeur, he asked him, in a low voice, why he was waiting.

The man seemed surprised, and looked from father to

to daughter in amazement.

"Mr. Moon said, sir, I was to bring him back here, by your orders; and then, when he'd packed up his things, I was to take him on to Bath to catch the early mail."

"Yes. Well, I've changed my mind. Back quietly into the yard, and shut up the car for the night. Then go straight upstairs, and if anybody knocks, don't answer."

"Yes, sir."

Alaric Smith waited to see his order carried out, and then led Nellie into the house by the back door, with a certain stealthiness which filled her with dread.

What was he going to do to Gustavus Moon?

On his way Alaric Smith learned from the servants—who were amazed to see their master, having heard that he would not return that night, that Moon was eating a hasty supper in the dining-room.

Reaching the hall, Smith imperiously whispered to his daughter to stay where she was, and taking from the hatstand a stout stick, went noiselessly to the dining-room door, opened it suddenly, and disappeared from her sight, shutting it quickly behind him.

Nellie clasped her hands, in terror-stricken expectation.

She had scarcely done so when an unearthly yell of pain such as she had never heard before, rang through the house, and then a stifled cry of—

"Murder!"

CHAPTER XXXIX

"MURDER!"

For the second time the cry, muffled indeed, but quite distinguishable to Nellie's frightened ears, came from the dining-room, startling the servants, who crowded into the hall, but refrained from approaching the door of the room whence the cries came.

It was left to Nellie, broken, shaken, distracted as she was, to turn the handle with wet and clammy fingers, calling out as she did so—

"Papa! Papa! Are you hurt! Open the door!"
For it was locked.

No answer came to her, but she could hear that a scuffle was going on in the room. She could hear the sounds of long-drawn, panting breaths, of groans, muffled cries, muttered curses. But she was in such a dazed state that she could not make out whether it was her father or Moon who was the assailant, or from whom the half-stifled cries had come.

"Won't you help me? Won't you come and force the door?" cried the girl, to the frightened women who hung in the background, close to the door leading to their own quarters. But all the answer she got was their rapid retreat from the hall.

"Call Richards," said she. "I must have the door opened."

As she raised her voice, there was a lull in the disturbance inside the room. But it was only for a moment. Then

351

a revolver shot rang through the house with its sharp pingping. There was a crash of glass, the sound of a heavy fall, and then there was a dead silence.

Nellie hurled herself frantically against the door. She knew that the revolver was Gustavus Moon's, and she now felt almost sure that, on entering the room, she should find her father lying dead. Her strength was unequal to the attempt to break her way in, and the servants having all disappeared, whether in search of assistance or not she could not tell, she was hesitating whether to dare to go outside and get in by the window without waiting for a man to help her, when she heard the sound of rapid footsteps crunching the gravel in front of the house.

Running to the front door, she opened it softly and peeped out. Yes. It was Moon, hobbling along in evident discomfort, but very fast, with one arm hanging limply at his side. He was escaping! he had done his work.

With a low cry, she ran back to the dining-room door, and made another half-frantic attempt to open it by turning the handle. To her surprise, it gave way at once, and she almost fell into the room.

Who had unlocked it?

Not surely her father, who was lying face downwards on the floor near the window, with one hand stretched out, moaning convulsively. She ran to him, raised him gently, spoke to him softly—

"Father, father, are you much hurt? Don't you know me? It's I—it's Nellie!"

For answer he tried to raise himself, staring out into the darkness. There was no other light than that given by the faint rays of the moon, for the lamp which had been on the supper-table had been dragged off and extinguished, and a strong smell of paraffin came from a white heap by the table, which Nellie at first took to be a dead body, but which she soon discovered to be the various dishes, candlesticks, decanters, and other appointments which had been

dragged off the table during the scuffle, and over which the white table-cloth lay in a heap.

"Where is he gone? Where's that thief?" asked he,

hoarsely.

"Do you mean Gustavus Moon?"

"Of course I do. Where is he, I say? Go after him; find him; stop him!"

It seemed a shocking thing to Nellie that, even at that moment when he had escaped with his life, her father's

greed should overpower all other emotions.

"Never mind him now, father. Be thankful you are safe," said she, as she helped him to rise and saw that blood was flowing from a wound on his left hand. "Did he shoot you in the hand?"

Alaric Smith made no reply. He had hobbled to the window, and was staring out into the moonlit garden.

"You can't go after him. You couldn't catch him if you did. I heard him; I saw him running down the drive. He must be a long way off by this time."

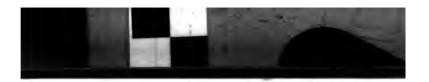
"The thief! The rascally thief!"

The words made the girl shudder. That her father should consider himself ill-used by being deprived of his ill-gotten gains seemed to her so shocking that a feeling of repulsion crept over her as she listened, as she watched the craning of this feeble frame, wasted by disease, over the window-ledge. It was clear that his own ailments, his own injuries, counted for nothing with him in comparison with his loss.

"Come upstairs," said she, impatiently, "and let me see what I can do for you, and whether I had better send at once for the doctor."

"Doctor, no!" said he, irritably. "No doctor can cure what I'm suffering from."

Disgusted, Nellie said nothing more, but in silence helped him out of the room and upstairs, when she had shut the window, which had been broken in the scuffle, closed



353

the shutters, locked the door of the room, and taken away the key.

"Come—come and help me!" cried Alaric Smith, impatiently, while she did these things. "He won't come back. He's got nothing to come back for!"

Nellie heaved a sigh of relief. She was glad, absolutely glad, that the diamond was gone. Since she could not restore it to its owner, at least it was something to be thankful for that it was no longer in her father's possession. She found, on examination, that he was more exhausted than hurt, with the exception of the wound on his hand, which she washed and bound up, and of various discoloured flesh bruises obtained during the scuffle with Moon.

He would make no answer to her question whether the wound was caused by Moon's revolver; but Nellie was inclined to think that the shot she had heard must have missed him. He was very sullen, very morose; and when his daughter offered to sit up with him, he refused very impatiently, and told her to go to bed, and to leave him alone.

Thankful to obey, she went to her own room, and, wearied out in body and mind, slept heavily till the sun was high next morning.

The next few days she spent in a kind of stupor. Of the two, indeed, she was more in need of rest and care than her father; and Mrs. Barr insisted, on pain of making her see the doctor, upon her remaining in bed. Nellie agreed to this, having learnt that her father was better than had been expected, and that he did not ask for her. She was most anxious not to see the doctor yet herself, for she was afraid of his questions; it was inevitable that the whole neighbourhood should be alive with gossip and rumour concerning the death of Lady Alford and the other events of that night, and she knew too much to care to be interrogated.

She learnt from Mrs. Barr that the dreaded inquest on Lady Alford had been avoided, as her own physician and the doctor who had seen the body both agreed that death was the result of sudden excitement and exertion upon a weak heart.

In the mean time, questions had been asked as to the cause of this excitement, and the police were in search of the man who was supposed to have frightened her.

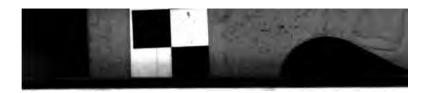
A police-officer, indeed, came to see Alaric Smith on this matter, and was told a perfectly clear story of the father's expedition in search of his daughter, who had left the house without explanation; of how Gustavus Moon had doubtless been the innocent cause of poor Lady Alford's alarm, she having taken him for a burglar when he was only looking for Miss Smith. Alaric Smith added that Moon had lost his wits with horror on hearing of the death of the lady, had returned to The Firs, discharged his revolver at his friend, and finally run away no one knew whither.

When Nellie heard of the police-officer's visit, she began to hope that Moon might be caught, and the diamond found upon him and restored to Lord Alford. But day after day passed, and no such news reached her ears.

In the mean time the funeral of Lady Alford took place, and news came that Lord Alford and Lady Alicia were living alone at Heynes Hall, all the noisy party having disappeared, and some even of the servants having been dismissed.

It was the beginning of the end, people said; and Nellie's heart rose in revolt when her father said exultingly that the Canningtons' downfall had begun. But she took these words in silence, as she did everything, and kept her grief and her shame to herself.

Life at The Firs had sunk to a monotonous level. Alaric Smith only came downstairs for a few hours in the day, and took very little notice of his daughter. She, on her side, being used to this treatment, settled down to her



355

old occupations of housekeeping, reading, and a little gardening, and was at least thankful that she was now relieved of the presence both of Gustavus Moon and Joel Bridger.

When the solicitor learned that Moon had gone away with the diamond, his visits to Alaric Smith and his daughter at once ceased.

No event occurred to break this monotonous life for three weeks, and then the post brought Nellie a letter from Lord Alford.

She took it into the garden, and read it by a great rosebush, with her heart fluttering and her eyes dancing.

"My DEAR NELLIE,

"It seems an awfully long time since I saw you. I have wanted to come over a dozen times, but my aunt says—and a woman knows more about these things than a man, I suppose—that it would set people talking if I came posting over to see you so soon. For that matter, what can one do without making people talk? I never can do anything, it seems, without finding the neighbourhood bursting itself with gossip! However, I don't want them to gossip about little Nellie, so I'm just pottering about here, all by myself, which is not a very lively occupation. Will you write to me, just to let me know how you are? I'm awfully wretched here. Things look black all round, and But there, I suppose you never heard of the Jews, did you, child? I hope you never may! This is rather a rambling sort of letter; I don't like to say much, but I feel I must say something.

"Yours always,
"Alford."

Nellie was poring over this letter for the fourth time, devouring every word, when suddenly she was shocked to find it snatched out of her hand by her father, who had

approached her without being heard—an easy task enough, as she was completely absorbed in her occupation.

She turned upon him quite fiercely, but he merely made her an imperious gesture to be silent while he read the letter from end to end. Then he gave it back to her without a word, and without the softening of a muscle of his face. With an indescribable heartache she took it and went into the house.

"Are you going to answer it?" he called after her in a mocking tone.

"I—I suppose I'd better not," said she, under her breath, as she went in.

She was quite sure of this the same day, for in the afternoon Lady Alicia drove up, and with very little preamble, tackled Nellie on the subject. Alaric Smith was upstairs, so the two ladies were by themselves.

"I know you're such a good little girl, my dear," she said in her sweetest tone, "that I can talk to you quite openly. My nephew wrote to you yesterday, did he not?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. Now I'll tell you frankly that he likes you so much that if you were to give him any encouragement, he would enter into a flirtation with you instead of doing what he ought to do at once."

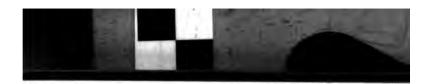
"And what is that?" asked Nellie.

"Go over to America and find an oil-girl, or a tinnedmeat girl, or any sort of girl who has plenty of money and is presentable—most of these trans-Atlantic heiresses are that, fortunately—and marry her and save the old place."

"Oh!" said Nellie, revolted by the matter-of-fact tone more than by the words. "Surely he needn't do that!"

"If he does not, the estate, the Hall, everything, will have to go. He's in debt up to the eyes. Surely you must have known, my dear! Everybody knows."

Nellie bowed her head in assent.



357

"Of course I've heard what people say. Only—only I hoped it wasn't true."

"It is true—every word. So now, my dear, you know where your duty lies, and how you can be of service to us all. Don't encourage, don't see him. I think I can rely on you."

She looked earnestly into the girl's face. Nellie looked up proudly.

"Of course you can-if it breaks my heart!"

She scarcely heard the rest of what Lady Alicia said, as she chirped on perfunctorily for another ten minutes, drank a cup of tea, and went away.

The trial came very soon. That evening Nellie heard the sound of hoofs in the drive, and saw, through the curtains, Lord Alford, looking handsomer than ever, swinging off his horse in front of the house. She ran to the door of the room, and seized the maid who was going to the door.

"Say that I'm not at home," she whispered; and then she went noiselessly back into the room to cry her eyes out.



CHAPTER XL

Nellie waited in the drawing-room till she heard the hoofs of Lord Alford's horse returning down the drive; then she stole into the hall, picked his card up from the table, and carried it off as a treasure.

She had scarcely done so when she heard her father's voice calling to her from upstairs. She ran up, trying to hide the traces of tears on her face.

Alaric Smith was pottering about his own room in his dressing-gown, smoking an excellent cigar, as usual.

"Was that Lord Alford?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't he come in?"

"I told them to say I was not at home."

"That's the second visitor you've had from Heynes Hall in one day? Besides a letter?"

"Yes."

"Lady Alicia didn't stay long. She's lost her enthusiasm for me now I've lost the diamond!" said he, mockingly.

Nellie drew herself up.

"You can't say that of Lord Alford, though. He's never troubled his head about the diamond."

"No. Only about you. Nellie, it's a pity I haven't got the stone. It might have bought you a coronet, my girl."

Nellie turned away, angry and hurt.

"What's the matter now?"

359

"I hope you don't think that I should ever have entertained such an absurd idea as that!"

"Why absurd? You're fond of him. He's fond of you. He wants money. If you had the diamond——"

"It would be his, as you know, as quickly as I could give it to him. But he wouldn't be required to take me into the bargain."

She would not heed his commands to her to stay, but, disobeying him for the first time, ran out of the room and downstairs into the garden, where she fell straight into the clutches of the Earl himself. He was close by the wall of the house when she dashed out, and stretching his hand towards her, he caught her by the arm and brought her to a sudden standstill.

"Ah! I thought I'd found you out! Since when, Miss Smith, have you made up your mind to be 'not at home' to me?"

Instead of being overwhelmed with confusion, as she ought to have been, Nellie found herself inexpressibly comforted and delighted to be in his presence again. She was sufficiently mistress of herself, after the first momentary surprise, to laugh a little.

- "Only since this afternoon," she admitted quite simply.
- "Ah! My aunt's been here?"
- "Yes."
- "And what did she come for? What did she say?"
- "She told me you were going to America."
- "And what else?"
- "Oh, she asked after my father."
- "I mean what else did she say about America?"
- "I can't remember every word."
- He laughed.
- "Can't you? Let me try to refresh your memory. Did she say anything about my marrying out there?"
 - "I think she did."
 - "And what did you say to that?"

"I thought," replied Nellie, gravely, "that it was rather

early for her to begin to talk about such things."

"That's exactly what I told her myself. It's not decent. But she talks about nothing else from morning till night. It's very painful to listen to."

They had begun to walk up and down the little lawn at the side of the house. He held his hands behind him, and his riding-whip in one of them. She walked demurely, plucking at the rose-bushes as she passed them.

"After all," said Nellie, "she only talks about it because she's so anxious about you. It wouldn't be personally pleasant for her to have a wife from another country installed at the Hall as mistress instead of herself."

"Nor for me," said he, quietly. "Frankly, do you think it's quite dignified for a man of my rank to hawk it about as the only asset he has of any value?"

She hesitated.

360

"I wish it hadn't to be done," she said. "But what else is there to do?"

She was surprised at herself. If she had been told that morning that she would in the evening be calmly persuading Lord Alford to marry an American wife to patch up his fortunes, she would have laughed at the idea. Now, however, having once had the notion put into her head as a good one, and feeling the urgent necessity of some vent to the strangely high spirit which took possession of her as soon as she was with him, she was delighted to have this course to urge upon him, particularly as he wanted a lot of urging.

If he had jumped at the idea of the American wife, she

realized that she would not have been so pressing.

"I'm sure I don't know," said he, dismally. Then he looked askance at her; but she would not return the look. "It's a pity you're not an American heiress, Nellie!"

She took this speech quite quietly. Secretly, however, it sent a thrill of pleasure through her.

361

"If I were," she said, "I'd marry one of my own countrymen, instead of paying so much down for a husband who didn't care for me."

"Well, I wish you were an English heiress, then."

She summoned all her courage, and deliberately told him the truth.

"If I were," she said, "I couldn't marry you, Lord Alford, after all that has happened between my family and yours! It would be much less decent even than the American idea. It would be a scandal."

The colour left Lord Alford's face, and he stood still. She had to stop also.

"Do you mean that?" he said, looking earnestly into her face.

"Yes, yes. Think a moment, and you will see it yourself."

"You mean that, if I were at this moment to ask you to be my wife, you'd say No?" said he, incredulously.

"Oh yes, I do, I do.

"But I want you to marry me, Nellie. I came here

this evening to ask you to."

"I knew it!" cried she, clasping her hands, while the tears ran down her face. "Oh, I knew it. I was sure of it! How could you? How could you? Just think a moment how absurd it is, and—God bless you for being so—so—so ridiculous!"

Her voice sank away, and the tears came fast. But still she was on her guard. She had something of the feeling, towards this hot-headed, generous young man, of a tender guardian, a watchful mother, and even while her heart melted, her self-possession remained strong. She would not let him come very near her, but stood on one side of a standard rose-tree, and forced him to remain on the other.

"Why is it ridiculous? Nellie, you are a prig. Why should you care? Why should I care? I've never felt to any woman as I do to you. You could manage me as

nobody else has ever been able to do. And you're clever. You might help me out of my difficulties perhaps."

She shook her head sorrowfully.

"If I could, do you think I wouldn't? And without being bribed by marriage."

"Bribed! What a ridiculous way to talk! Don't you

care for me? You've always pretended to."

"It's not pretence. I like you just as I've always liked you. But I've never wanted to marry you, and I don't now. I want good things, all good things, to happen to you. And marriage with me would not be a good thing, it would be a very, very bad one. What you want now is money, money and rank too, if possible, but money above all. Lady Alicia's quite right. It's a dreadful thing to have to say, but marriage for love is a luxury you can't afford."

The Earl looked at her in amused astonishment.

"The idea of a bit of a girl like you daring to talk to me like this! It's preposterous! What should you know about these things?"

Nellie laughed a little.

"Lord Alford, if you'll just think of the ladies I've met at your place, and of their talk when they were by themselves—and when they weren't"—she added demurely, "I think you must own that if I don't know something about these things, it's not for want of lessons!"

He stepped back to look full at her, and burst out

laughing.

"By Jove!" said he, "you are coming out strong! Nellie, are you so sure you haven't the makings of a very fair Countess in you? You could hold your own with the tongue with the fiercest old dowager, I'm sure!"

She shook her head and blushed.

"No, I couldn't. I can talk to you ----"

"By Jove, you can!"

"But not to other people in the same way."

363

- "That's because you love me!"
- "Very likely!"

He stared at her.

- "You admit that?"
- "Oh yes."
- "Come, then, don't be silly. Give me a kiss, and-"
- "Good-bye, Lord Alford, I must go in. I see my father looking out of his window, and——"

She looked up, and so did he. And there, as she had said, was the face of Alaric Smith frowning at them from his window upstairs. Lord Alford was furious. To be rebuffed by this girl, to whom he had indeed done the greatest honour in his power, and then to see this old rascal of a father of hers frowning down upon him as if he had been a worthless adventurer! It was too much. Drawing back and raising his eyebrows, he said stiffly—

"I beg your pardon. I didn't know that you were so carefully looked after, Miss Smith. Pray forget my intrusion. Good-bye."

Nellie was aghast. She would have given the world to make it up with him, to apologize, to beg forgiveness. But how could she under the very eyes of her watching father? She could only reply to his stiff raising of his hat by a frightened and frigid "Good-bye," and peep down the drive in a scared manner as he rode off without once turning his head.

Surely, surely, if he knew or guessed what the Earl's errand had been—and Alaric mith was shrewd enough to guess most things—he had softened towards Lord Alford now!

Whether he had or not, he said nothing about it to his daughter.

Two days later she heard, with a pang, that Lord Alford had gone away on a yachting expedition, and that Heynes Hall could be viewed by sightseers, as usual while he was away, on Thursdays, by application to the housekeeper.

It was on a Thursday that Nellie was surprised, on coming in from a walk in the village, to hear that her father had ordered the motor-car round, and had gone for a drive. On his return home he would not tell her where he had been, but there was about his manner that evening an air of malicious and uncanny satisfaction which disturbed her, although she could make no conjecture as to the cause.

On the evening of the following day, when the weekly paper containing the local news came, Nellie noted the eagerness with which her father seized it and turned over the pages, as if in search of some particular paragraph.

At last, it was evident that he had found what he was looking for, and Nellie, who was in a fever of anxiety to know what had happened, watched him while he eagerly ran his eyes along a few lines in the middle of the paper.

When he had finished reading he put down the paper with a look of intense gratification on his face. She hardly dared to take it up, so certain did she feel that there was something in it which it would give her pain to read.

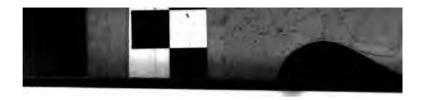
Her conjecture was a shrewd one. When he had stepped out upon the lawn with his cigar, with an air of extreme self-satisfaction, she took up the paper with trembling hands, found the middle page, and searched eagerly for anything of interest.

There it was, in all the hideous reality of print.

"OUTRAGE AT HEYNES HALL.

"Our readers will hear with regret that a dastardly outrage was perpetrated yesterday at Heynes Hall, by some miscreant who has not yet been identified. During the passage through the state apartments of a party of sight-seers under the auspices of the housekeeper, some member of the party, actuated by motives either of mischief or of plunder, probably the former, must have seized the opportunity of the housekeeper's back being turned, to do what appeared to have been wanton damage to the valuable





365

pictures and furniture of the absent Earl. The amount of the damage has not yet been ascertained, but it undoubtedly amounts to several hundreds, if not thousands of pounds."

Nellie stood, aghast, in the window, while her father looked defiantly at her from the lawn below.

"Was it you who did it?" she hissed out, as she leaned, pale as the dead, out of the window.

"The amount of the damage has been exaggerated," replied Alaric Smith, in a cool drawl. "But what damage was done, I admit was done by me. Are you satisfied?"

Nellie drew back, sick with shame. That her father should be so vindictive, so petty to the end, in the face of Lord Alford's unparalleled generosity and kindness, was a personal disgrace which made her feel that she could never meet the Earl's eyes again.

CHAPTER XLI

THERE was no doubt that Alaric Smith was growing weaker, and it was the knowledge that he was not far from death which kept Nellie at his side in spite of the terrible vindictiveness which seemed rather to increase than to diminish as the days went slowly by.

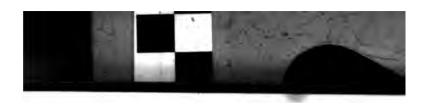
She tried to learn further particulars of the outrage committed by him at Heynes Hall, of the extent of the damage that he had done there. But the matter was hushed up so promptly, and it was so impossible for her to make personal inquiries, that she could find out nothing more than the details given in the paragraph in the weekly paper.

Of course it was useless to say more to her father upon the subject. The habit of silence, bred in the long years of prison life, grew upon him more and more, until at last his daughter felt that he looked upon it as a sort of intrusion if she addressed him without encouragement.

His constant occupation was smoking. And if his cigars were good, and his dinners excellent, he seemed perfectly content.

So two more weeks went by, and then one Sunday afternoon Nellie was surprised by a visit from the Bridgers. Father, mother and son all drove up together in the hired fly, and descended upon Alaric Smith and his daughter as they sat in the drawing-room, the one with his cigar, the other with a book.





367

Alaric Smith looked suspiciously at his daughter as the fly drove up, and said briefly—

"This looks bad! Am I dying? Or-"

She had not time to answer before the door opened, and the parlourmaid announced the visitors.

Joel Bridger professed that he had been overworked of late, but that he had seized the first opportunity of coming to inquire after his old friend. Mrs. Bridger was gracious, in the fashion of a mechanical figure, to Nellie; while Bram, who looked more awkward than ever in a tail-coat that flapped against his legs and with a tall silk hat—that somehow looked taller than it ought to have done—held affectionately on his knee, blinked shyly at the rest from a chair near the window.

Alaric Smith, however, was by no means gracious. He listened to all they had to say with a rigid face, and peered at first one and then another of his visitors with a scrutinizing look, which betrayed clearly enough that he knew there was some motive beyond simple good nature in their unexpected visit.

"What made you come?" he asked at last abruptly, fixing upon his late partner an expression of gimlet penetration "You don't care two straws about me, any of you, now I've lost the diamond, and——"

He stopped, having perhaps caught a peculiar look on Bridger's face.

"Oh, come, I hope you don't think so badly of us as that, Smith," said Bridger, in his round, genial voice, as he bent forward to smile amiably into the invalid's face.

"I don't think any worse of you than you deserve," was the gracious response, which Bridger, however, affected to take as a good joke.

"Who was it told you I was so ill?" went on the ex-convict, dryly. "Who have you been talking to about me?"

"Nobody, my dear fellow, nobody. It was our

own hearts told us you must need some comfort, with your health giving way, and your poor little daughte threatened with the serious prospect of being left alone is the world."

"Ah!" Smith turned away from the husband and addressed himself to the wife. "Mrs. Bridger, it's a long time since I had the pleasure of seeing you. I suppose you would hardly have known me."

The lady had risen, as stiffly as an automaton, from her

chair by Nellie, and gone over to the invalid.

"Indeed I think you're looking wonderfully well, considering all things, Mr. Smith," said she. "And if I've seen little of you, your dear daughter and I are well acquainted. Aren't we, Nellie?" She bent down to speak more confidentially. "I'm very glad that the intercourse between her and the fast people at Heynes Hall is broken off, Mr. Smith. It must have been very distressing to you to find her in communication with people of that frivolous type."

"Ah!" said Smith. "They were frivolous, weren't

"Ah!" said Smith. "They were frivolous, weren't they? And now please answer me one question, Mrs. Bridger." And he lowered his voice. "When was it you

saw Gustavus Moon last?"

The sudden change of colour, the involuntary exclamation betrayed her.

"How did you know?" burst from her lips.

Alaric Smith laughed softly. But his face was troubled and anxious.

"I knew you were in communication with him," he said dryly. "I knew it, and I guessed that he'd been telling you lies, lies." He raised his voice, so that Bram and his father, who had been talking to Nellie, heard what he said, and listened even while they went on making a pretence at conversation. "Why can't you and your husband see that the fellow's an adventurer, and that he's not to be believed?" He paused, breathing heavily, and then asked with great

369

irritation, "Where has he been all this time? In the hands of the police? Or where?"

"He got away from Bristol in a small coaster," said Bridger, rising and coming over to speak earnestly and to the point. "He was laid up in hospital at Southampton for some weeks, and now he's come back here. He's very bitter against you, Smith. And I should advise you to be on your guard in dealing with him."

"He's a thief," said Smith, with a lowering expression.

There was an awkward pause.

"He says," suggested Bridger, in a low voice, "that he brought nothing away from here but a little money which he had to take to pay his expenses."

"What did he run away for, then?"

"He says you threatened to murder him, after robbing him of—of what he had about him. You may just as well know all, now we've told you part. He says you shot at him with his own revolver, and then threw it at his head as he ran away."

Nellie uttered an exclamation. She had found the revolver in the garden some days after the struggle between Moon and her father, but had of course not heard this version of the story.

There was another uncomfortable silence, and then Bram stood up suddenly and stiffly.

"Show me where you found it, will you, Miss Smith?" said he.

There was a do-or-die air about him which made her supicious of his intentions, nevertheless Nellie was obliged to lead the way into the garden, and to point out the spot in question.

"That fellow Moon means to do for your father," he remarked, as they looked down at the place she pointed out. "He called at the office, and if you'd heard him you would have felt as much upset as we were. I suppose, if I may say so, it's six of one and half a dozen of the other, but

there's bound to be another ugly row between them before long."

Nellie grew white. She could not held inferring, from Moon's return, that he had either lost the diamond, or that, as he had evidently told the Bridgers, Alaric Smith had taken it from him in the struggle. This, she felt, would account for the equanimity with which her father had regarded Moon's escape, an equanimity which had surprised her.

She drew a deep sigh of distress, and Bram looked down

at her kindly.

"It's awfully rough on you, all this," he said. "We came to-day to see whether there was anything we could do."

She looked up at the long, lean face above the long, lean

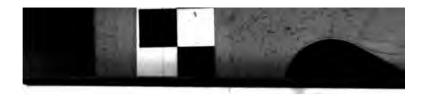
body, with questioning eyes.

"I suppose you wouldn't really have cared," she said, with a sort of hopeless recklessness, "if you hadn't all begun to suppose once more that we had the big diamond here?"

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't suppose my parents would have taken such an active interest in the matter if they hadn't heard of that," he admitted. "As for me, of what use would it have been for me to come dangling after you when Lord Alford was about?" She reddened angrily at the name. "Oh, I didn't mean to say anything offensive, Miss Nellie. But you've been so much at Heynes Hall that people were bound to say you were friends with the people there; and if he hadn't gone away on his yacht I should have thought it useless to—to—"

"It is useless, in any case," she answered gently. "What I like about you, Mr. Bram, is that you have never pretended to take any interest in me except as a duty. And I feel sure you'll be glad to know that the unpleasant duty needn't be kept up. I'm not going to marry. How could I, after going through all this? I feel quite old, as if I'd



37 I

lived through about nine lives, like a cat, and got tired of them all."

Bram sighed.

"I like you better than you think," he remarked with stoical calm. "However, if you don't like me, I suppose there's no more to be said. But look out, both of you, for there'll be more trouble presently, mark my words!"

Nellie shuddered. She saw what had happened; that Moon had tried to get Bridger to enter into a fresh league with him in order to blackmail Alaric Smith; that Bridger had preferred to work on his own account, and had therefore brought his son at once to renew his offer. And she saw that Bram was right. There was more trouble in store.

When the family had had tea and driven back to Bath, Alaric Smith had all the windows shut, and gave strict orders that nobody was to be admitted into the house on any pretence whatever without his knowledge. And although he said nothing to her about his fears, she knew that they were strong and well founded.

And when she went to bid him good night, she found him carefully cleaning the revolver which had been picked up in the garden.,

"What are you going to do with that?" she asked, trying not to let too much anxiety peep out in her tone.

"I'm going to load it and keep it handy," said he, quietly.

And one glance at his face told her that remonstrances would be in vain.

Two days passed quietly, however, though both Alaric Smith and his daughter lived in a state of tension. On the third the ex-convict got a letter, which Nellie did not see, but which put him into high good humour. He sent for his daughter, and asked her whether she would like to go on a sea-voyage. Nellie, suspicious of her father's tricks, at once surmised that he wanted to go to America to get rid of the diamond there. She hesitated, therefore, and expressed her

372

fear of sea-sickness. But he waved off her objections lightly, told her that it might be the means of saving his life, and abruptly commanded her to make her preparations, as they would start next day.

There was no help for it, and, more convinced than ever that the sale of the big diamond and escape from Moon's revenge were the two objects he had in view, Nellie, with a heavy heart, packed her trunks and prepared to leave The Firs, where she had passed such an uneasy four months.

If Alaric Smith had any confidence as to his intentions, it was Mrs. Barr, who bustled about, packed up his things, helped Nellie, and took instructions for keeping the house shut up while the master was away.

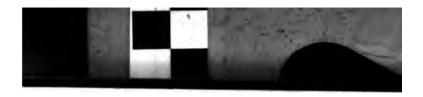
On the following morning, in a drizzling rain, they started on a journey which seemed remarkable to Nellie for the behaviour of her father, who was in a state of restless anxiety all the time.

His eyes were bright and eager; and he kept a look-out all the way, as if he feared pursuit.

All that he would vouchsafe to tell her was that they were to start from Southampton, and it was not until they reached that town that she discovered that their first destination was Cherbourg. To her questions her father made evasive replies, and she had to content herself with the knowledge that at least one shame was now to be avoided. They would not again meet Lord Alford. For the thought of meeting him since that latest outrage of her father's had grown terrible to her. He had carried generosity too far already: she was thankful, in a pitiful kind of way, that his patience could be tried no more.

It was dark when they reached Cherbourg, on a miserable, rainy night. To her surprise, he told her that they would have to go straight on board another vessel. She had expected to be able to get a night's rest at an hotel before going further.

They had a tedious and disagreeable walk in the darkness,



373

and then they came suddenly upon a mass of masts and spars, out of which a white funnel gleamed bright in the darkness. A man in seaman's dress, carrying a lantern, saluted them and led them to the quayside, where a gangway was ready placed for them to go on board.

Nellie felt a terrible fear rising at her heart, a fear that seized her and held her breath.

"Where are we going? Not-oh, not-"

The words died on her lips.

"This way, ma'am, the yacht's here," said the man, in a voice she seemed dimly to recognize.

She found herself forced on to the gangway, and gently pressed forward. As she passed the seaman, she had seen the words on the jersey he wore: Gaiety Girl.

Trembling, almost sobbing, trying to draw back, yet gently forced onward, she stepped once more on to the deck of Lord Alford's yacht, and the Earl himself, raising his peaked cap with the smile she knew and loved so well, was bidding her welcome.

A second later there leapt on board from the quay above a man whom she had seen on the journey across, a man wrapped in a long cloak and with a cap drawn well over his eyes. She turned from Lord Alford to her father with a stifled cry. By the little she could see of the man's face, she knew that it was Gustavus Moon.

CHAPTER XLII

LORD ALFORD turned quickly to see who it was that had made this unceremonious intrusion. Moon had taken of his hat and was bowing low, with no further attempt at disguise.

"You know me, Lord Alford. My name is Moon,"

said he.

"What the devil do you mean by getting on board like this?" demanded the Earl, wrathfully, while a couple of the yacht's crew who had run up, stood ready to put the intruder off the yacht by force, should they receive orders to that effect.

Meanwhile Alaric Smith, on recognizing Moon, had attempted to return up the gangway to the shore, and was only detained by the arms of his daughter, who had implicit trust in Lord Alford's power to keep the peace between the two men.

"Wait, father, wait. It's all right," she whispered.

"Don't look as if you wanted to run away."

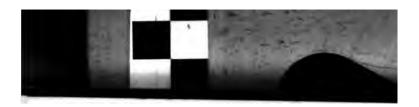
"But that's exactly what I do want to do!" muttered Alaric Smith, who was grey with apprehension.

His spirit seemed to have left him for the first time, and Nellie was afraid for the result of this meeting, still more afraid of what might happen if once they were to leave the shelter of the yacht.

"He's quite quiet now. Lord Alford will make him

behave properly," she whispered.

In the mean time the Earl had drawn Moon aside and



375

demanded sharply what he wanted, and Moon, profusely apologetic, gentle and courteous, had given his explanation.

"The fact is I've been trying for days to get an interview with that old rascal Smith, and that he always avoids me," said Moon. "I went up to his house and was told again and again that he was not at home. I followed him to-day, and ran him to earth here. All I ask is that he will see me alone for a few minutes, to explain the way in which he's treated me. I am very sorry that I should have to ask this in such a way as to give you annoyance; but indeed it's the only way in which I could get what I wanted."

Lord Alford looked at him narrowly. He knew that he was dealing with a knave; but considering the character of the man whom he had just taken on board in the character of a guest, he hardly felt justified in treating this one from too loftly a standpoint.

"You know," said he, "that the police are looking for you in connection with the events of the night on which

my poor wife died?"

"I am aware of that, and I don't think I could give a better proof of my entire innocence in those events than by coming straight to you, Lord Alford."

This was reasonable. The Earl hesitated.

"Supposing I were to get you the interview you ask for, would you consent to let me give you over to the Southampton police, to be dealt with as they please in connection with that affair?"

"Certainly, certainly."

Lord Alford looked surprised.

"Oh, well, in that case, I must let you stay. We start as soon as it's light to-morrow morning, and by the afternoon I will have landed you on the other side—in custody. Eh?"

"I am absolutely at your disposal, if only you first grant me my request."

The Earl hesitated again. This seemed a fair offer

enough, but it was obvious that there was another side of the case to be considered.

"Now I must see what Mr. Smith says," says he. "In the mean time will you go downstairs with my steward and another man, and look upon yourself as in some sort in custody!"

"Yes. On condition, of course, that you get me the

interview."

"I'll do my best."

Moon was led down the companion-way, and Lord Alford returned to Nellie and her father, who could not be induced to come further than the end of the gangway.

"That man," said Smith to the Earl, the moment he

came within hearing, "means to murder me."

"Oh, but we shan't let him do that. We shall take too

good care of you."

"Let me go ashore, Lord Alford. I can't stay here with that man on board," persisted the invalid, who indeed looked very ill and unequal to anything so fatiguing as an exciting interview.

"Shall I send him on shore!" asked Lord Alford. "I can't let you go away; first, because you don't look well enough to do any more travelling yet, and this man, if he has any evil intentions towards you, would carry them out more easily ashore; and, secondly, because this cruise is for you, to do you good, and I should like to carry it through now we've started."

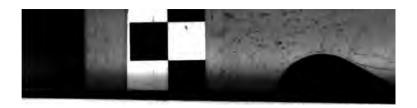
Smith shook his head, and Nellie spoke.

"What did Mr. Moon say to you, Lord Alford? What

excuse did he give for intruding upon you?"

"He says he has been trying to obtain an interview with your father, that he only wants a few minutes, and that, if he can have them, he will willingly let me take him across to Southampton and give him up to the police——"

"For my murder?" suggested Alaric Smith. "That is what he would have to be given up for if he once got at me.



377

Have him searched, Lord Alford, have him searched. I'll be bound there's a revolver upon the fellow."

"If there is," said Lord Alford, quietly, "we'll take him back with us without any more questions." He gave a hurried direction to a couple of the crew, whom he called up to him, and they both disappeared. "In the mean time, be assured that no harm shall come to you while you are on board my yacht, and come and get a little rest. You look tired, both of you."

There was no resisting his will, his kind but decided manner.

Five minutes later Alaric Smith, worn out by a fit of coughing and pale as the dead, was lying back on a couch in one of the state-rooms, with his daughter sitting, miserable and alarmed, beside him; and Lord Alford returned to them with the news that Smith's suspicions had been well founded.

"We found not only a revolver but what is, I believe, called a knuckle-duster upon him; and in the circumstances I have considered myself justified in violating the condition under which he gave himself up; and I'm going to land him into the care of the English police with as little delay as possible."

Smith listened without looking at the speaker. His eyes were glassy and dull, his breathing was difficult, his voice

was growing faint and weak.

"Ah!" he said, "it's all of no use. He'll get at me, I know he will. I feel his rascally hands at my throat. I hear his voice, I can see his eyes glaring at me, just as they did that night—that night."

And he put out his arms, as if thrusting away an attacking hand.

Nellie was chill with alarm. The Earl spoke cheerily, told him again that no harm should come to him, that within a few hours Moon would be in the hands of the police, and without further power of doing mischief. But nothing

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would comfort the invalid, nothing would persuade him the

A daintily tempting meal, and some champagne, however, presently brought back a semblance of life to his far and of animation to his manner. After receiving a repeated assurance that he should be well guarded that night, and that Moon would be better looked after still, he recovered a little of his lost composure, and even remembered to thank Lord Alford for his invitation.

"I never told Nellie where we were coming till we were actually here," he said.

Nellie blushed and bit her lip as the Earl looked at her,

and said with decision-

"I see. If you had, she wouldn't have come."

"Do you think I'm ungrateful, then, Lord Alford?" said the girl, without looking up.

"That's quite the last thing I should think of you, the

last."

She looked up shyly, met his eyes and looked down again. Things were getting very difficult for her, very difficult indeed. The beginning of the ordeal came afer dinner, when Alaric Smith fell into a doze on the couch where they had made him rest. Lord Alford and Nellie sat near him, at a little distance from each other, for a long time without speaking.

He spoke first.

"I say, Nellie, I suppose you're awfully angry with me for playing this trick upon you, eh?"

She hesitated.

"N-n-not exactly angry. Of course the sea may do my

father good."

"I hope so. Nevertheless, that was not my principal reason for asking him to come." She did not ask what the chief reason was, so after a pause, he told her. "I knew that if he were to come, you'd have to come too."

"After-after-everything, why did you?"

379

It was very incoherent, very vague, but he understood well enough. He changed his seat for one much nearer to her: it was highly necessary that they should not disturb the invalid by bawling to one another.

"Because I've made up my mind."

Nellie said nothing. She was bewildered by all this; by her father's consenting to go on a cruise with the man he professed to hate, the man whose property he had only recently been wilfully destroying. Had Lord Alford forgiven that? It seemed to her unpardonable, and she wondered.

"Well," said he, after a pause, "why don't you speak? Your tongue can move nimbly enough when you like!"

"I wanted to ask you something."

"Go on."

"Did you—did you discover anything more about the destruction of your pictures at Heynes Hall a few weeks ago?"

He looked puzzled.

"What destruction?"

She drew a long breath and looked at him.

"Didn't they tell you!"

"Frankly I don't know what you're talking about."

"The *Herald* said you'd had a lot of damage done to your pictures and furniture by some malicious person."

He shook his head.

"It can't have been very serious. A mistake altogether, I should say. I don't think my aunt would dare to keep such a thing as that from me, and I've heard from her each week."

Nellie drew a long breath of relief. She was only too thankful to believe that he was right. He wondered what was in her mind, never, certainly, guessing the truth. Presently he said—

"Are you glad, or sorry I forced this cruise upon you?"

"Oh, you know!"

The admission was enough. He had sprung from his seat and was beside her, bending over her, when Alark Smith woke up with a start; and Lord Alford wheeled round to bestow upon him the slightly less effusive attention than he had proposed to give to Nellie.

The night passed without incident, though Alaric Smith slept fitfully, and listened constantly to every slightest noise, haunted by the fear of his enemy, in spite of all the pre-

cautions taken to calm him.

Not until morning dawned, and the yacht steamed out to sea in a faint haze of white mist, did he fall into a sound

sleep, the sleep of exhaustion.

The morning was well advanced and the Gaiety Girl was out at sea when Lord Alford persuaded the invalid to come on deck to enjoy the sunshine. Alaric Smith was lying back in a deck-chair with a cigar between his lips, silent, ungracious, and wrapt up in himself as ever, when there was a sudden commotion on board, and he turned at once to the colour of a dead man.

"Moon!" cried he, hoarsely, as he started to his feet, and made for the ship's side; "I knew it!"

Lord Alford and Nellie, utterly taken by surprised, were not so rapid in their movements; and before they could change their position, he leaning against a rail and she sitting on a coil of rope near her father, they saw, coming along the deck at a swift and cat-like pace, the man whom they were conveying across the channel to the custody of the police.

Moon was pale and determined, silent and quick. He had almost reached his adversary, already his long, lean hands were outstretched towards him, when Lord Alford, seeing murder in his eye, caught him by the throat, throwing him backwards, and pinned him against the companion.

"You scoundrel! What do you want?"

Moon, his eyes still fixed on Smith, cried hoarsely: "Ask him what he's done with the diamond, your diamond.

381

He's got it, I tell you. He's got it! He took it from me by force, and he's hiding it still. Ask him for it, ask him!"

Alaric Smith turned, heard him, cried out in a hoarse and feeble voice—

"I have not got it. It's a lie!"

"Search him! Search him! He's got it on him!" cried Moon. And the next moment he yelled out like a maniac: "Take care. Stop him! stop him!"

There were half a dozen of the crew in sight, some of them helping Lord Alford to hold Moon fast, some standing ready in case they were wanted to help the other man.

In the mean time Alaric Smith was fumbling in his breast with nervous, clumsy fingers. Even while Moon's husky cries and exclamations filled the air, the sick man drew from his breast something that flashed like a huge dewdrop in the morning sun.

An exclamation broke from Lord Alford's lips. Nellie was too much overwhelmed to speak or move.

With his stealthy eyes turned towards Moon, Alaric Smith held the great sparkling thing up for a moment flashing in the sun, and then, summoning all his strength, hurled it into the depths of the sea.

A sort of moan sounded from lip to lip as the big diamond, which might have saved the fortunes of the Canningtons, disappeared for ever in the glistening blue water.



THE effect of the loss of the diamond was electrical.

Gustavus Moon uttered a hoarse cry, and stared at the sparkling sea with glaring, mad eyes. Lord Alford was for the moment stupefied by the unexpectedness, the suddenness of the occurrence. Nellie hid her face in shame and despair.

CHAPTER XLIII

Her last hope of restitution was now gone.

Only Alaric Smith seemed the easier for having lightened himself of his precious burden. He went back to his chair, balancing himself carefully, and still with his cigar between his lips. And he did not cast another glance at Moon.

His attitude, his silence seemed to say that he had done with the jewel as he would soon have done with life, and that he had nothing more to trouble himself about.

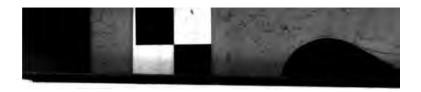
It was Moon who spoke first.

"Gone!" muttered he, staring at the water, and once more struggling to get free. "Gone! Aren't you going to stop the yacht? Aren't you going to try to get the stone? Are you going to lose a fortune as quietly as that?"

The Earl shrugged his shoulders. Decidedly, of all the

witnesses of the incident, he was the least affected.

"Good Heavens, man, do you take us all for lunatics?" he cried good-humouredly, still holding the frenzied man by the arm, and making a sign to Nellie to lead her father away. "We might fish about for ten years, and never find the exact spot where the stone lay, for one thing; and for another, we don't know the depth of the water, and we



383

certainly haven't got a rod long enough or bait sweet enough to tempt a diamond with."

Moon heard with dull ears. Then he made a forward movement, trying to get to the vessel's side. Not once did he cease to stare at the dazzling water, though the dancing of the sunlight made his eyes moist.

"Gone! Gone!" muttered he again.

Then he looked round him. But Nellie had by this time coaxed her father away. Moon turned to Lord Alford.

"That rascal-" began he, slowly.

The Earl interrupted him.

"Remember the proverb about the pot and the kettle," he said under his breath.

Moon drew himself up, and made an irritable gesture, trying to get free. His face had grown bloodless, his eyes dull.

"Can't you leave me alone?" he said peevishly. "I've been ill; I'm not strong yet. I—I——"

Indeed he began to grown incoherent, and Lord Alford signed to the men who were holding him that they might retire.

"Get him some brandy," said he.

Moon gave him a grateful look. As soon as the men had drawn out of hearing he said—

"Thank you, my lord. What you said is quite true.

If Smith's a rascal, so am I."

"Well, I don't want to be hard upon you, but I'm afraid it must be admitted that your ideas of what is legitimate in the way of acquiring a competency don't come up to the common standard."

Moon shook his head. One of the crew had brought the brandy, and he swallowed a couple of mouthfuls eagerly.

"Quite true, quite true. But, remember, I've come out of a bad school. You don't know what the level of morals is in the place where I've come from!"

Lord Alford was interested.

"But I suppose," he suggested, "your morals were not quite up to the mark before, or you wouldn't have got there!"

Moon smiled faintly.

"I'd committed forgery," he said. "That's quite true. But I wasn't as bad when I went in as when I came out."

"Ah! Forgive me, but that's very often said; it's never yet been proved, though, to the satisfaction of those of us who have kept outside."

"Well, I wasn't as bad as Smith, anyway," said Moon, not without a gleam of answering humour in his own eyes. He was beginning to recover his self-possession, as well as to understand that, as he had now nothing to gain by an attack upon Smith and everything to lose by offending Lord Alford, he might as well take things quietly. "Or, if I was as bad," he added meditatively, "I wasn't as clever. Look here, my lord," he went on, dropping into a sort of half-servile tone, with pitiful air of having played and lost, "compare him with me at this moment. What have I done? Committed forgery, served my term, and while I did so, chummed up with this man, and done my best to cheer him out of the black, low spirits from which he used to suffer. He got fond of me, if such a man can get fond of anybody, promised me a share in the wealth he was going to get by selling his diamond. Oh yes, he owned he had it hidden, and he used to promise that I should marry his daughter, and be a rich man in return for what little I did for him. I took a letter from him to his daughter when my time was up, and what did I find? Another man, Bridger, his old partner, digging to the very foundations of The Firs, all to get at his diamond."

Lord Alford uttered an exclamation. Moon went on—
"So I admit I took a turn at looking for my diamond, and when Smith came out, and chose to forget his promises, I confess I did my best to get the better of him. But I

couldn't. Nobody could. Forgery, violence, tricks; all were thrown away. Smith, my lord, is the devil himself."

"Well, I'm inclined to think he's a very fair imitation,"

admitted the Earl.

"And what is his punishment, for robbing you in the first place, for cheating me in the second, and Bridger in the third? For taking advantage of my newly broken arm to get the diamond from me when he found me at The First on the night your wife died? He leads a life of ease and luxury, gets invited by you on board your yacht, and will be petted and pampered to the end of his days, in spite of the fact that he has indulged his malice at the very last by throwing away, before your eyes, the diamond with which he could have proved a little gratitude to you, as well as consideration for his daughter!"

"He was afraid of your taking it from him by force,"

said the Earl.

"Yes, and of my getting the credit of giving it back to you! That was what he couldn't stand?"

"It does look like that !"

"Well, so much for him and his punishment. What is mine? I have lived a life of shifts ever since I came out of prison; I've lost my old friends, and now I've lost my new ones. I own I've done my best to outwit this old rascal, but I've done no other harm. Yet my punishment is to be handed over to the police, and proceeded against, I suppose, for robbing Smith's daughter of the diamond, though I only had it for a couple of hours, and never did myself any good by that or by any anything else."

Lord Alford listened quietly, and then said-

"Frankly, I don't feel much pity for you; and you must remember that Smith is dying, and that even justice has to give way to death."

"He dies precious hard!" grumbled Moon.

"Well, he's dying now, that's certain. I dare say he's treated you badly, but I'm not at all sure you wouldn't have

played the same game if your position and his had been reversed. In the mean time, I must insist that he shall be left in peace now. If you make no further attempt to attack him, it's possible that you may find me forbearing. Will you submit to re-arrest, and remain quietly below till I come to you?"

Moon had lost his spirit now, and was almost on the verge of whimpering. Hatred for Smith had given place to a sort of maudlin sorrow for himself which, while it disgusted the Earl, moved him at the same time to a sort of

contemptuous pity.

Moon was led downstairs again, and Lord Alford, with a very grave face, went to the door of Alaric Smith's cabin, and knocked softly.

Nellie came to open it.

"Can you speak to me for five minutes?" said he.

Nellie, who looked desperately miserable, bowed her head and came out.

How is he?" asked the Earl.

" Tust the same as ever. He has said scarcely a word to est since I brought him down. He lies quietly. The only change is that he doesn't want to smoke."

Lord Alford knew that this was a bad sign, but he did not wish to alarm her, so he merely nodded as he led the

way up to the deck.

"Now," said he, "what am I to do with this fellow Moon? I know he's a rascal, so do you. But whether, considering all things, I am bound to give him into custody, is what I should like you to decide for me."

"Don't," she whispered, bending eagerly forward. hate the thought of it. I know he's-well, we needn't say what. But still he's been good-natured sometimes, and kind, and there's something horrid about giving up a man who has been on the footing of a sort of friend, isn't there?"

"That's what I feel."

"As for his attacking me, he didn't mean to hurt me.

387

He took the diamond from me, and I would struggle for it He warned me not to, but I had to go on, till he threw me off."

"Yes, I can't forgive him that," said Lord Alford, between his clenched teeth.

"But I can. And as for his thinking he had a right to to the diamond, why, every one thought he had a right to it but you!"

And, overwhelmed again with despair, she bent her head and sighed heavily.

"Well," said he, cheerfully, "the fishes have got it now, so we needn't worry our heads any more about it. Not that I ever did. It seemed clear that, whoever was to have it, it was not to be me. There, don't fret about it. I never cared about the thing one quarter as much as you, Nellie."

"I did so hope—when I got him here, and guessed that Moon hadn't got it, that I might save it for you after all!" moaned she. "Do you think it's quite impossible, Lord Alford, that it can be recovered by dredging?"

"Quite. They'll try to find it, of course. There'll be companies formed to recover it, and they'll throw into the sea after the diamond a lot of money they might have found a better use for. The shares will go up, and then they'll go down. But the diamond will remain down all the time."

There was a silence for a few moments. Then Mrs. Franks appeared on deck, and standing at a respectful distance, showed that she wanted to be seen.

Nellie rose with a contraction of the heart, for she had a presentiment that the summons was come.

"You want me?" she said with white lips.

"I think you'd better come now," whispered the good woman back. "And don't be frightened if he doesn't know you. He's wandering a little." Then, as Nellie hurried down the companion-way, Mrs. Franks said in an undertone to the Earl: "It's the end, my lord."

He went down and remained outside the cabin, while Mrs. Franks joined Nellie inside.

Alaric Smith was sitting up in his berth, gasping for breath, and staring about him. It was not quite plain whether he knew where he was or not. Nellie went up to him, spoke to him gently, but he did not look at her.

"There's-some jewellery there-behind the skirtingboard," he gasped out, not very distinctly, pointing vaguely round the cabin. "I brought some away, but some is still

there. I should like to give it up, to give it all up."

The relief and joy with which the girl heard these words it is impossible to describe. She followed the direction of her father's dying eyes, and then saw that Lord Alford was within hearing. The delight which shone in her face touched the Earl to the quick. Late and partial restitution was something, and so the poor girl felt.

"Yes, father, I'll see that it's given up to-to Lord Alford," she said gently, as she supported him against her shoulder, and tried to steady her voice as she answered him.

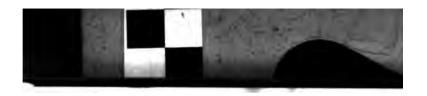
He nodded slowly.

"To Lord Alford. Yes. Yes. Where-where is he?"

Whether the light was failing him, or whether his mind was still wandering she did not know. But Nellie glanced at the Earl, with her eyes imploring him to come in. Then she knew that her father was conscious still.

But his strength was failing him, and as he feebly waved his hand in recognition of the Earl, he fell back, in spite of Nellie's efforts to hold him. For a few moments he lay panting, and they offered him a restorative, which he pushed away impatiently.

"Quick!" said he, suddenly, in a louder and clearer "Quick! Lord Alford, come here, come—quick!" He clutched the Earl by the shoulder, but the intense excitement which possessed him seemed to be burning up the feeble remainder of life in him, and the rattling breath made it difficult to understand the words he tried to utter. "The



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389

stone—the stone I threw in the sea—the sea—was—was not the real diamond—not your diamond." Lord Alford heard with amazement, and Nellie with passionate relief and excitement. The dying man stopped, gasping for breath. It was evident that the great secret that was trembling on his lips was exhausting his last flicker of life in the telling. "The real stone—the real diamond—is—is—is—oh, God!"

He was losing strength, mind, memory, all, and he knew it. The thread of his speech once lost, he could not recover it.

Struggling, gasping, trying still from time to time to utter the words that would not come, Alaric Smith fell back dead, with the secret of the lost diamond untold.

CHAPTER XLIV. AND LAST

Even Gustavus Moon was awestruck when he heard of the death of his old fellow-convict, and when, as the yacht steamed into Southampton Water and Lord Alford sent him ashore with a present of money and the advice to live honest and live far off for the future, it was in a subdued manner and with apparent gratitude that he thanked the Earl and went quietly away.

As for Nellie, now that it was all over she broke down, and could do nothing but shiver and cry and whisper to Mrs. Franks that she wanted to go home, home to The Firs. So the good woman took her straight to the station, and wired to Mrs. Barr to expect her, and Nellie, weary, ill and broken down, went back to The Firs that very night, only just in time, as she herself knew, to avoid being laid up away from home.

For more than two weeks she lay ill, sometimes delirious, and haunted by strange fears and strange shapes, always tended assiduously by the good woman to whose care she had instinctively turned.

When she got better she learnt that her father had days before been laid to rest in the graveyard on the hill. Yet, alone in the world as she was, Nellie was not allowed to feel lonely. Indeed, the strongest feeling which possessed her at this time was one of intense peace and restfulness. Not that she was without natural regrets for her father; but he had been so reserved to her throughout the months during which she had tended him dutifully, he had been, moreover,

391

such a constant source of anxiety and remorse that even her affectionate regret was overpowered by the knowledge that he could sin no more.

Mrs. Barr did her best to assure her that Mr. Smith was much more tender-hearted, much more thoughtful, than anybody had supposed.

The silent ex-convict had taken a fancy to the garrulous but kindly old woman, and had opened his heart to her more freely than to his own daughter. And Nellie was only too glad to believe what Mrs. Barr told her, that he had had more feeling than she knew of.

Nellie's memory was blurred during the first part of her convalescence, but still she knew, without asking any questions, where the hothouse fruit and flowers came from which a groom brought regularly to the door each morning.

It was not until she was watching this man ride away down the drive one morning, in the third week after her father's death, that she started up with a sudden recollection of Alaric Smith's dying words.

"There's some jewellery behind the skirting-board."

How came she to have neglected that clue for so long?

Without a moment's delay she set about her search, and remembering where he had hidden the diamond, she at once went down to the hall to look for the rest of the treasure. As she had anticipated, it was indeed in the most unlikely place in the world, and therefore, the safest, that the artful Alaric Smith had bestowed that portion of the stolen jewels which he had not yet sold or appropriated.

Just as the front door was the last place where Bridger and Moon would have thought of looking for the big stone, so the skirting-board which ran round the hall was not a place where searchers for treasure would have expected to find anything of value. On the right-hand side, close to the umbrella-stand, Nellie found, lying in a mass of dust and cobwebs behind the skirting-board, such of the jewels as had not been disposed of.

Not a very great haul, she thought, when she found that she was able to hold all the things in her two hands. But jewels do not look to advantage in such circumstances, and Nellie was astonished later to discover the value of that heap of dusty-looking stones.

How was she to get them back to their owner? She did not want to see Lord Alford again. To her own surprise and shame she felt an absolute dread of the emotion which the sight of him awoke in her. Should she entrust them to Mrs. Barr for delivery at Heynes Hall after she herself had left The Firs?

For Nellie had now made up her mind definitely to try her luck in London. What would become of the house she did not care. She would have nothing to do with it; and as she knew very well that Lord Alford would not either, she had a vague idea of leaving it to take care of itself, and seeing what happened.

She made her preparations for departure, took possession of what money she found in the cash-box in her father's room, paid the wages of the servants, gave all she could spare to Mrs. Barr, and leaving herself only enough to start life as an independent woman in a very modest fashion, ordered a fly to be brought round in the morning, and went to bed for the last time in the house where she had passed so many anxious days.

No fly came, however; and when she heard the sound of wheels, and looking out, saw the great big lumbering family carriage from Haynes Hall at the door, Nellie knew that there had been treachery in the camp, and the apparently guileless Mrs. Barr was in league with the enemy.

The next moment a message was brought up that Lady Alicia wished to speak to her, and Nellie, going downstairs, very white and still rather tottery after her illness, found the old lady in the carriage, holding out her little hand.

"Jump in, my dear. Yes, yes, I know you were going away, but I want you to come and see me and spend the

393

day at the Hall first. Can Manners take your trunks in front? I think he can take one, and we can have one inside. Make haste, my dear. It's such a long way, and it's cold to-day—for September, don't you think so?"

Whether she was really pleased to have Nellie with her again or whether she was only obeying orders with a good grace, it was impossible to tell. But she was lively and kind, and asked, though perhaps with only perfunctory interest, about the state of the girl's health.

Nellie was so much touched by this unexpected occurrence that she could scarcely control her voice.

"There, there, my dear," said Lady Alicia, patting her hands and speaking rather nervously, "don't give way, don't give way. We must all make the best of things, and after all, for you they're not so bad."

"How do you mean—for me?" asked Nellie, recovering

herself, and noting a certain emphasis on the words.

"I mean that, even if he's a ruined man, as undoubtedly he is, my nephew is still an Earl, and able to make a girl a Countess."

Nellie sat up. She began to understand.

"I see. You think he's going to marry me?"

"My dear, he's made up his mind, and as he's as wilful as he was when he was ten, there's no help for it."

"Oh, but there is," said Nellie, sharply. "There's no man on earth I wouldn't rather marry than Lord Alford, for a hundred reasons,"

Lady Alicia looked astonished, incredulous, rather offended.

"Indeed! I should have thought, with all your good points, that my nephew would be a good enough match for you!"

The girl burst out into a sorry laugh.

"Oh, how can you speak in that tone to me? Do you suppose I don't admire him more than any one else in the world? Yes, and love him, too, if I can dare to say so!

But the more I admire and love him, the more I'm determined never to let him do such a silly thing as marry me. Look here, Lady Alicia, do you think I don't understand? Listen, and I'll tell you how I look upon him. And upon myself. I can't look at him, or hear his name without a pang of shame to think that through my father he is poor: with that feeling in my heart about him, I'd rather die than let him marry me. And, on the other hand, if the diamond had been found, he would be rich again, and able to live as a man of rank should and must live. In either case marriage with me would be ruinous, mistaken, absurd, wrong. And you see that I shall hold my own, and that my common sense will carry the day against his romantic folly."

Lady Alicia was pleased, touched, but still incredulous.

"He's very persuasive," she said dubiously.

However strong Nellie's moral nature might be, and however able she might prove to resist persuasion and temptation, her physical strength was not yet re-established. So it came about that, when she found herself once more within the walls of Lord Alford's mansion, and knew that in a few minutes she would be face to face with the man whom of all others she wished to avoid, Nellie's powers of endurance threatened to give way, and at the sound of his buoyant, extraordinarily youthful voice she trembled and stood still.

When he actually appeared, however, she recovered herself a little, and finding a strangely tranquillizing effect in his very presence, she fell into an extraordinary primness and reserve, which delighted Lady Alicia but did not disconcert the Earl himself.

"So my aunt managed to carry you off? If she hadn't succeeded, I was coming myself. Only I'm glad you didn't let things go so far. It would have looked too much like abduction. As it is, we have brought off the thing in good style."

His hearty, boyish voice rang out as freshly and clearly

395

as if he had not had a batch of lawyers' letters lying on his desk, and a most unpleasant visit hanging over his head.

Nellie was quite resolved not to be amused, but to take things lightly. She had come to perform a duty, a pleasant duty, and she wanted to get it done and to go away.

"I've brought you the jewels my father spoke about, Lord Alford," she said in a matter-of-fact tone, when they

had all three entered the Rose Saloon together.

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To her disappointment, he took the tidings lightly.

"Have you? Then there'll be something less for you, and something more for my creditors," he answered. "You should have stuck to them, Nellie. Stick to all you can in this world; then it may benefit somebody who deserves it; if you don't stick to it, be sure it will go to somebody who doesn't!"

Her eyes filled with tears. She began to see, for the first time since she had known him, real anxiety, the lines of real distress, in his handsome, open face. Her primness was scarcely proof against the discovery.

"I thought—I hoped——" she began in a low voice.

"My dear child, you should neither think nor hope in this world. Don't cry. I ought not to have had you brought here. The fact is I wouldn't have sent for you if I'd known some news I've just received. They're going to sell us up, aunt. Nice, isn't it?"

Nellie's anguish checked him in the midst of his assumed carelessness. The low cry she uttered pierced his heart, and he was by her side in a moment. Lady Alicia, frightened, more perturbed than she cared to show, hurried out of the room. Nellie fought with herself and controlled her feelings.

"Let me bring them," she whispered. "They may be of more value than I know."

He stopped her, putting his hand on hers.

"Keep them," he whispered. "How do you know they didn't honestly belong to your father? They can do me no good, child. Things have gone too far. Look here,

Nellie, I meant to marry you, but things have gone too far for that, too. You had better go away, take your trunks and what is in them, and start life with the jewels as my lovelegacy. To give them back to me now would be just like throwing money into the sea."

The words awoke an ugly memory, and they both turned pale and looked down. He touched her shoulder

quite sharply.

"Come," said he, "let's both pluck up, and live through the day as if everything was all right. Come, come, if we stay here talking we shall get sentimental again, and sentiment is—pardon the expression—the devil! Come, come!"

Impatiently, feverishly, he led her out into the hall, where they saw Lady Alicia going slowly upstairs. He ran

after her, beckoned to Nellie to come up too.

"Let us go into my study and ring for some sherry and biscuits," said he. "Both of you poor things look starved."

He was evidently trying to carry off some strong feeling under an assumed lightness of manner; and Nellie, her heart aching for him, felt bound to help him by speaking as nearly as possible in the same vein. He led the way through the long gallery, and suddenly turned to his aunt.

"By the by, aunt," said he, "what is this Nellie tells me about an attempt to damage the pictures while I was

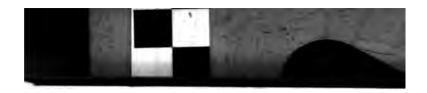
away ? "

"Oh, it was a mere nothing. You know what exaggerated stories get about," said Lady Alicia, hastily. "One of these show-cases had been forced open, I forget which, and the rumour spread directly. Nothing was stolen, I assure you."

As she spoke, Lord Alford was examining the specimentables with their glass lids, and when she ended he cried—

"Ah! This must be the one. I can see the marks of some tool, a knife probably!"

They were all clustered round him, Nellie looking so eagerly at the marks which she knew her own father to have



397

made that Lord Alford asked her why she was so deeply interested.

She blushed, stammered, said nothing coherent. In the meantime the Earl's attention was attracted by something within the case which made him utter the words—

"By Jove!"

The next moment, to the amazement of the ladies, he had smashed the glass lid with his fist, and taken out, with his cut and bleeding hand, something which flashed in the light.

"It's only the copy your father had made!" gasped

Lady Alicia.

But Lord Alford's face was white and wet. He stared from the flashing thing in his hand to the face of the two ladies.

"It's not the copy! It's the diamond!" shouted he, in a voice that rang through the room.

The next moment Nellie, with a face radiant with a kind of frenzied joy, clutched his sleeve.

"It's—it's my father—it's—it's restitution!" gasped she, as she fell senseless into his arms.

It was true. Alaric Smith had repented in time, had made his way with the Thursday sightseers into Heynes Hall with the object, not of doing damage but of restoring the stone to its owner. There it had lain, unsuspected, posing unostentatiously as the copy which, since its abstraction by Moon, had never been missed.

"Your dowry, Nellie!" whispered Lord Alford, hoarsely, as he kissed back the colour into the face of the girl who had brought back luck with her love to the Cannington

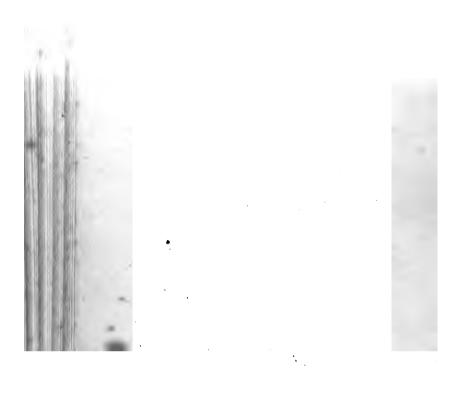
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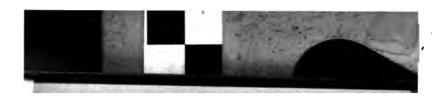
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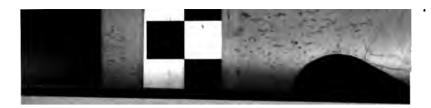
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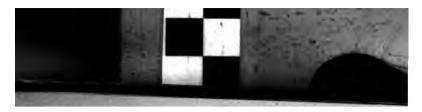
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